

Chapter 4

Women's Participation in Local Governments in Bangladesh and India

Farah Deeba Chowdhury

Abstract

Women are beginning to stand for elections and have won seats or held political office at different tiers of government in India and Bangladesh, but the numbers are still very low. These two countries have excelled in mainstreaming women in local governance structures. Following constitutional amendments to reserve one-third of all local government seats for women in India after the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution in 1992, more than one million women were elected to local government positions. Similarly, institutional reforms to reserve seats for women's active participation in local governance in Bangladesh in 1997 resulted in many women councillors being elected. Despite various problems faced by women in both India and Bangladesh, reservation of seats for women in local bodies increased women's visibility in public life and provided them with social legitimacy. Reservation of seats for women in local bodies has shown that women are increasingly playing an important role in social, economic, environmental, dispute resolution, legal and political areas. These in turn have an impact on democracy and development, which is the crux of this research study.

4.1 Introduction

Democracy is a system of representational government in which the people exercise sovereign power directly or indirectly. In a democracy, ordinary citizens have a very important role to play in the state affairs (Shihata 1997: 635) and every citizen is considered to be autonomous and self-determining. Post argues, 'Democracy requires that persons be treated equally insofar as they are autonomous participants in the process of self-government' (2005: 147). Democracy can ensure development covers all forms of human progress including 'political rights under a form of government based on broad participation' (Shihata 1997: 635). Although democracy requires that all persons be treated equally and considered autonomous and self-determining, women in Bangladesh and India are lagging behind men in nearly all spheres of development and democracy. The Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act, 1997 provides direct election for women in reserved seats. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in India provides for one-third of the seats in rural and urban local governments respectively.

Are women members in Bangladesh and India able to participate effectively in local governments? What problems do they face in politics? Does their participation bring any changes to local people? These issues will be addressed in this chapter.

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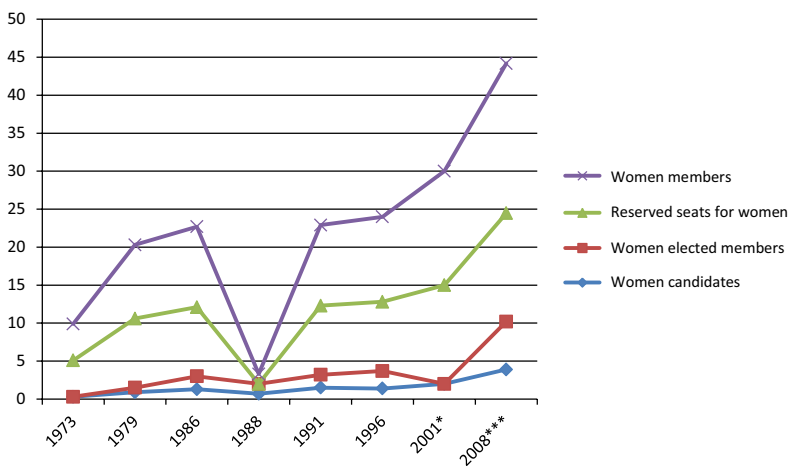
Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, 2001.

4.2 Bangladesh

4.2.1 Women in national politics

Bangladesh has had two women prime ministers in the last two decades, Khaleda Zia (1991–96 and 2001–06) and Sheikh Hasina (1996–2001 and 2009 to the present). Despite this, the percentage of women Members of Parliament (Jatiyo Sangsad) is low. Jatiyo Sangsad is a unicameral legislature, comprising 350 seats of which 50 are reserved for women. The members are elected from single territorial constituencies by direct election. In addition, 50 seats were reserved for women to be elected by the directly elected members of the parliament. This provision did not deprive women of their electoral right to contest the elections from general constituencies as independent or political party candidates. Despite this, women hold just 19.7 per cent of the seats in the current parliament, of which 13.37 per cent are reserved seats and 6.33 per cent are held by directly elected women members (Women in National Parliaments 2013). Only 11.76 per cent of cabinet ministers are women (National Web Portal of Bangladesh).

Figure 4.1 Percentage of women in the parliament of Bangladesh, 1973–2008



Source: Chowdhury (2013: 33)

In the electoral process political parties in Bangladesh prefer male candidates. Sheikh Hasina once remarked, 'Women candidates could not survive in the election politics of violence and money. Moreover, the popular belief is that nominating a woman for a seat is the other name of losing it' (Chowdhury 2009).

In order to ensure a minimum representation of women in parliament, the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, which came into effect on 16 December 1972, provided for 15 reserved seats. Ziaur Rahman, the seventh President of Bangladesh, enlarged the number of reserved seats for women to 30 in 1979. The members in the reserved seats acted as the 'vote bank' of the treasury bench. Women MPs in reserved seats were branded as '30 sets of ornaments' due to their low level of participation in the parliament. The provision of reserved seats encourages their dependence on their male colleagues (Choudhury and Hasanuzzaman 1997). Parliament passed the 14th Amendment Bill of the Constitution on 16 May 2004 and increased the number of reserved seats from 30 to 45 (Zaman and Ahsan 2004). The seats reserved for women were valid for 10 years and distributed among political parties proportionate to the number of seats they held. Accordingly, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was allocated 36; four went to the Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh, three to the Jatiya Party (Ershad), and one each to the Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) and the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) (*The Daily Star* 2005). The Awami League, which was not allocated any of the reserved seats, demanded direct election.

In the ninth parliament (2008–2013) the Awami League has an absolute majority. Parliament passed the 15th Amendment Bill of the Constitution on 30 June 2011 and increased the number of seats for women from 45 to 50 (*Deccan Herald* 2013). If direct election in the reserved seats is introduced, then women members' dependency on their male colleagues will no longer exist and they will be accountable to the voters. That would help to ensure their effective representation in the parliament.

Why is women's participation in the parliament and cabinet low in a Muslim-majority country such as Bangladesh? Is religion the main factor hindering women's participation in politics? Ayesha Khanam, President of the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad said, 'Religion is not a factor here...If it was, those women who are in politics today and who have the support of [hundreds of thousands] of people and who work together with the religion-based parties, would not be here' (Islam 2007). Then what are the problems that women face in participating in politics? Why are Bangladeshi women not more prominent in politics, despite having two women leaders? In fact, male control of both the public and private spheres hinders women's political participation. In the public sphere, women have to contend with *mastan* culture (*mastan* culture refers to the killers, extortionists, looters, and perpetrators of violent crimes who operate under the supervision of so-called 'godfathers') (Rashiduzzaman 2001: 23) and availability of illegal arms, accessibility to black market money and fear of sexual harassment (Chowdhury 2009). In the private sphere,

Table 4.1 Percentage of women in the Parliament of Bangladesh, 1973–2008

Election year	Women candidates	Women elected members	Reserved seats for women	Women members
1973	0.3	0	4.8	4.8
1979	0.9	0.6	9.1	9.7
1986	1.3	1.7	9.1	10.6
1988	0.7	1.3	0	1.3
1991	1.5	1.7	9.1	10.6
1996	1.4	2.3	9.1	11.2
2001 ^a	2.0	2.3 ^b	13.0	15.0
2008 ^c	3.9	6.3	14.28	19.7

^a Different daily newspapers

^b During the first four years of the eighth parliament, when there were no seats reserved for women, the representation of female members was 2.3 per cent

^c Daily newspapers

Source: Chowdhury (2013: 33)

women have to cope with a lack of control over their own income, family involvement and non-co-operation of husbands.

Women in reserved seats lack political experience, and since they are indirectly elected they do not have the political strength to hold and exercise power. In 2013, the cabinet has six women lead important ministries, including defence, foreign affairs, energy, agriculture, labour and employment. In Bangladesh it is generally accepted that men will lead the important ministries, so the women appointed to these posts must be experienced, knowledgeable, competent and capable to avoid negative perceptions among the people about the quality of women's participation.

4.2.2 Women in local government: important contribution of women in local councils

Women representatives in local government in Bangladesh have awareness of social issues and have been able to prioritise the welfare of their communities with respect to housing, security, clean water, sanitation and education for the benefit of men, women, boys and girls. Further, these women have impacted on the social implications of policies with respect to health services, child care, poverty alleviation, dowry problems, violence against women and girls, and community development. Moreover, when planning for city development the women take into consideration the physical environment of communities and the quality of life, without excluding the art and culture of the various communities. By serving as positive role models to other women and mobilising male champions to support the cause of women, they have gradually improved the status of women to promote policies and funding of developmental projects that are beneficial for communities. In this way, these women encourage more women to participate in the political process.

Through this political engagement, women are accelerating change and gradually transforming the political environment of local governance to one that is more people friendly, consultative and transparent.

Bangladesh presently operates two types of local government institutions for the urban (Pourashavas and City Corporations) and rural areas (Zila [district] Parishad, Upazila Parishad and Union Parishad). The Union Parishad is headed by a chair, and consists of a further nine general members plus three reserved seats for women (Khan and Ara 2006). The women are voted in by direct election, and are able to contest the general seats and that of the chair.

During the Upazila Parishad elections in January 2009, 1,936 women candidates contested 480 seats across the country. A total of 475 women were elected. The additional post of vice-chairperson of the country's Upazila Parishads was created exclusively for female candidates. Candidates are elected by direct vote, even though the post is reserved for women (*The Daily Star* 2009). However, female vice-chairs of Upazila Parishads throughout the country could not start their jobs following the 2009 elections, as the government did not issue a circular regarding the newly created posts. There are no seating arrangements for the women at the Upazila Parishad offices, and they are rarely allowed to play a role in development activities in their area. The Upazila Parishad (Reintroduction of the Repealed Act and Amendment) Bill 2009 does not include any guidelines for the new posts. In the Union Parishad, proxy representation exists, which means male members of the family represent women Union Parishad (UP) members and many husbands help their wives with their work in the Union Parishads (Nazneen and Tasneem 2010).

Nonetheless, female Union Parishad members have been able to resolve family disputes. Many female members have participated in *shalish* (a social system for informal adjudication/justice) and many of them have presided over the shalish sessions. Various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women's organisations training programmes that focus on alternative dispute resolution and human rights, support creating space for women to participate in these shalish. Women in Bangladesh feel more comfortable discussing issues like marriage, divorce, domestic violence, dowry or polygamy with the female UP members. One female UP member said:

'Women were not a part of the shalish, we could not speak, could not decide but only spoke when we were asked questions. Now we are preferred by local people, particularly when it comes to women's issues, such as dowry, divorce etc.'

(Nazneen and Tasneem 2010)

Khan et al. report that with respect to reserved seats for women in the local governments:

...the reforms have opened up spaces for women and increased their visibility in formal political and 'male' spaces (i.e., local bazaars or markets, community

spaces, administrative offices for campaigning and monitoring of public works). In fact, the majority of the women councillors surveyed reported a high rate of engagement with development project implementation, local dispute resolution, and programmes for creating social safety nets... There is a high level of acceptance and satisfaction among the community regarding women councillor's performance in implementing safety net-related programmes and development projects.

(Khan et al. 2009)

4.2.3 Challenges experienced by women in Union Parishads

Union Parishads are the lowest tier of the local government structure in Bangladesh. There are 4,486 UPs and each has nine wards (Begum 2012). The Local Government Ordinance of 1976 provided for the reservation of two seats for women members in each Union Parishad. The Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983 increased the number of reserved seats to three. The Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act, 1997 repealed the nomination provision and introduced direct election in the reserved seats. As a result, 14,030 women were elected to the Union Parishads in the 1997 elections. This number is much higher than the 1977 election, when only 863 women were elected (Begum 2012). However, the constitutional clause did not assign specific roles, power or responsibilities to the women, giving room for ambiguity.

The provision of direct election in the reserved seats does not ensure women's effective participation in the Union Parishads, because of the discriminatory attitudes of the male members of the Union Parishads and their composition. Each Union Parishad has 13 members: one chair, nine elected members from the general seats (mostly men) and three women members from reserved seats (The Local Government/Union Parishads Act, 2009, s. 10). As a majority vote (7 out of 13) is required for all decisions, women members do not have any significant role in the Union Parishads (Begum 2012). The constituencies of women members cover three wards, compared to one ward in the constituencies of their male counterparts. Although women members of Union Parishads represent larger constituencies, they receive the same remuneration as the general members. Women members have to spend their personal resources to maintain contact with their voters, and cannot maintain close linkages most of the time. The chairs of Union Parishads and officials of the Upazilas (subdivisions) give preference to the general ward members in the allotment of infrastructure development projects (Khan 2006). Shamim and Nasreen write about a Union Parishad member:

Rokeya Sultana was elected member from Shikdar Para village under Cox's Bazar. Being a graduate and a daughter-in-law of a well-known family, Rokeya was encouraged to take part in Union Parishad elections. She was elected, but faced many hurdles created by the musclemen of opponents. The opposition tried to convince her through threat and other means to withdraw her candidature. However, she was not convinced.

Disappointed opposition set fire at her house, which caused her a lot of troubles. She cried for justice from the community, but failed to achieve it. She was frustrated for not being able to take part in the welfare activities of the locality. She always felt insecure and was no more interested to compete in election. She opined that it was wise to involve women at the local government, [but they should be assured of] security and equal opportunity.

(Shamim and Nasreen 2002)

Sexual harassment is a serious factor that may be preventing many women from taking up politics. Politics involves round-the-clock duty, travel and contact with strangers, while women may also face sexual harassment by their male colleagues. Courting arrest and facing police brutalities are more personally problematic for young women. If a woman political activist is raped or sexually harassed, it is not only personally devastating but can also damage her political career – though those with family political connections believe such a family background serves ‘as a relative safeguard against sexual harassment’ (Jahan 1987). According to a report in the *Daily Janakantha* (2009), four elected women members of a Union Parishad were raped within five months in 1999. Two women members accused the chairman and Union Parishad members of committing rape (Begum 2007). Women’s security is very important during Union Parishad election campaigns. Frankl (2004) writes, ‘It is especially dangerous for a woman to be out during the evenings when it is dark’.

Politics is monetised, so women also lack economic power to participate in party activities. Generally, women in Bangladesh work in low paid jobs and most do not have control over their income. That is why they cannot afford the expenses to run an election campaign, for meetings and other expenditure for political purposes (Panday 2006). Education is not a requirement to become a Union Parishad member, so many women who contest elections are illiterate and may not know about their rights and responsibilities. Often relatives or vested interest groups control them (Islam and Islam 2012). Nonetheless, NGOs play a highly effective role in creating consciousness among the voters. It was observed that there was a high turnout of women voters and a higher number of women candidates for Union Parishad elections in areas where NGOs were involved. Most of the candidates who won the elections were NGO group members, and they received financial and other support during election campaigns (Choudhury 2000).

The functions and roles of the women members in the reserved seats of Union Parishads are not specified, and it is not stated that they have the same duties and responsibilities as the members in the general seats (Khan 2009). Women members have complained of exclusion from responsibility by the Union Parishad chairs and male members, and that they were not given any specific duties, power or jurisdiction (Qadir 1999; Human Rights in Bangladesh 1998). Khaleda Begum, a Union Parishad member said, ‘I am

not given any responsibility for development work in my area, although I was elected. Moreover, I assured my people that I would play a role to develop the constituency and in social safety net activities. If I cannot play my role, then what is the point of getting elected to Union Parishad?' (*New Age* 2012). A female Union Parishad member said, 'We are losing our popularity as the Union Councils do not allow us to work for the people who voted us to power' (Chowdhury 2009). Another woman member complained that the chair and other UP male members did not invite them to UP meetings, or if they were invited the meetings were scheduled at night so that female members could not take part (Shehabuddin 2008). One study finds:

Women members are generally given assignments related to family planning, cottage crafts, education, and women's and children's welfare. They are also expected to deal with the women in the community, not the men. Most women had no committee assignment at all. Only about 20 per cent of women respondents who were on committees reported holding chair positions on UP committees. Men were more likely to propose new initiatives for local government, although women took a greater interest in such areas as women's development; men had proposed no initiatives for women's development.

(Shefali et al. 2005)

Parliament passed the Local Government (Union Parishads) Amendment Bill, 2001 to increase the participation of women members of Union Parishads. The bill provides for raising the number of standing committees of the Union Parishads from 7 to 13. Various functions of the Union Parishad are executed through these standing committees, and women from reserved seats would head one-third of them. The bill also provides for the formation of the *Samaj Unnayan Committee* in every ward consisting of the member of the reserved seat, who shall also be its chair (The Local Government (Union Parishads) (Amendment) Act, 2001). In most Union Parishads, the male chairs and members are reluctant to give women members a significant role and they

Table 4.2 Women's participation in Union Parishad elections, 1973–2003

Elections	Year	Women candidates		Elected chair and members	
		Chair	Member	Chair	Member
1st	1973	–	–	1	–
2nd	1977	19	19	4	7
3rd	1984	–	–	6	–
4th	1988	79	863	1	–
5th	1992	115	1135	8	20
6th	1997	102	43969/456 ^a	20 + 3	12882/110 ^a
7th	2003	232	43764/617 ^a	22	12684/79 ^a

^a Women contested and elected to the general seats

do not often constitute the standing committees (Khan 2006). One female member of a Union Parishad reports:

There are many barriers to work effectively as a Union Parishad member, and one of those is that we do not receive any government directives or circulars in time; also many times the chairman forges our signature to show the authority that we have been given the proper responsibility. They even do not notify us about monthly meetings, so we have no say in decision-making.

(Sogra 2008)

Zarina Rahman Khan also observes that the UP female members are marginalised in shalish, law and order maintenance, infrastructure building, citizenship certification, and birth and death registration. Nor are they able to play an effective role in education, health, agriculture or any other sector. She also notes that they were excluded from decision-making processes (Khan 2009). Male members, meanwhile, complain that women members cannot take any decision independently. They always want their husbands to help in their decision-making. Sometimes women members even invite their husbands to attend Union Parishad meetings in order to make decisions. They also may sometimes insist on changing the recorded decisions, because that is what their husbands want (World Food Programme 1999).

Women members are dependent on their husbands due to their lack of knowledge and experience regarding Union Parishad activities. One study finds that the decision of a woman to contest elections was usually taken by their husband or father-in-law. In some cases, husbands attend UP meetings instead of their wives. In other instances it is the husbands who do not allow their wives to attend the shalish or control their wives in other ways due to patriarchy. Sometimes women are not interested in participating because they believe that men should deal with these disputes (Hossain 2012). The legal implications of true representation of women in local governance should be studied further. Examples such as these clearly undermine the contribution and impact women bring to the electoral process, and signal the slow pace of change in the local settings.

In the city corporation elections in April 2002, women contested reserved seats for the first time. In common with the Union Parishads, women commissioners covered three wards in the reserved seats (Chowdhury 2009). However, the power and responsibilities of women commissioners from reserved seats were not specified, which frustrated them (*Prothom Alo* 2003). One study on women ward commissioners in Dhaka City Corporation and Narayanganj Municipality found they were all directly or indirectly affiliated to the major political parties. A large number of these women were related to other commissioners and most of them joined politics because of kinship (Zaman 2012). Women ward commissioners are unable to participate in the decision-making process due to the discriminatory attitudes of the male ward commissioners:

Whenever female commissioners stood up to speak, they were subjected to laughter and ridicule by male commissioners. Male commissioners always obstructed women from participating in discussions, lest these women get all the funds for the major problems of their locality identified in those meetings. Male commissioners, on the other hand, preferred confidential meetings with the mayor to discuss their locality's problems...Female ward commissioners faced many problems, from the initial proposal through to approval of any local work.

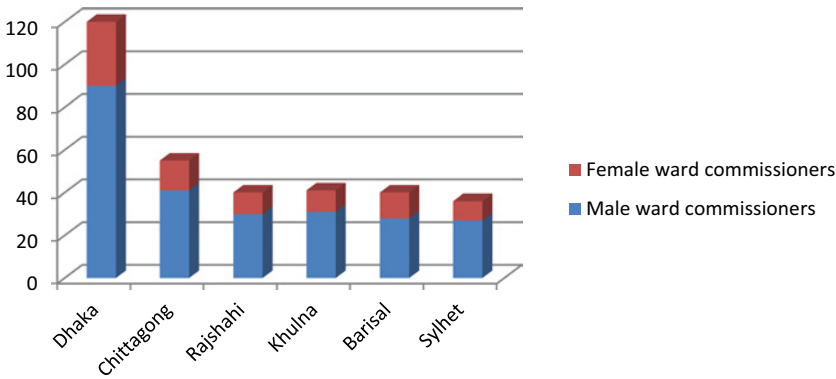
(Zaman 2012)

The government issued a circular on 23 September 2002, which said women commissioners were allowed to exercise 4 of the 16 powers and functions of the ward commissioners, but that this would apply only to those women elected to general seats. These functions were: issuing nationality certificates and character certificates, identifying successors of the deceased, birth and death certificates, and assisting the authority with censuses. The circular also provided that commissioners in general seats would be the chairs of the committees for law and order and that commissioners in reserved seats could only be advisers to the committee. Female ward commissioners filed a petition against the government circular in the High Court on 3 May 2003. The High Court issued an order on 16 August 2004, which stated that all the ward commissioners elected from general seats and reserved seats for women in city corporations were equal to their male counterparts, and should not be discriminated against or treated differently in any manner in respect of their powers and functions. The High Court also declared illegal and void four clauses of the circular that discriminated against the female commissioners elected to reserved seats in city corporations.

Despite the High Court order, the discrimination goes on. One female ward commissioner said that often they were not notified of committee meetings of which they were co-chairpersons or advisers. She said, 'But we sometimes find ourselves to be very important, which happens only when the UNICEF representatives or any representatives of donor agencies come to inspect our work. The guests go back with the notion that women ward commissioners are not discriminated against in any manner' (Chowdhury 2009). The result is that people cannot depend on female commissioners, so they go to the office of male commissioners to obtain a simple birth, death or nationality certificate. Women commissioners are unable to perform development activities, because of the interference of their male colleagues. Zaman writes about the experience of a female ward commissioner:

...she got a fund of 30 lakh taka for infrastructure development from the corporation, but could not utilise the total amount in the way she felt appropriate. Directed by a male colleague, she had to give a contract of 16 lakh taka to a contractor whom she did not even know. Another colleague also threatened her for the contract of the remaining 14 lakh taka. She added that female ward commissioners were bound to give their funds

Figure 4.2 Number of male and female ward commissioners in six city corporations, 2012



Source: Zaman (2012: 85).

for development work to their male colleagues as a sign of ‘gratitude for helping them in their election campaign’.

(Zaman 2012)

In the city corporation elections on 4 August 2008, not a single woman candidate competed for the mayoral posts in four city corporations and nine municipalities. Very few women contested the councillor posts in general seats. Yet women were in the forefront of election campaigns on behalf of their respective candidates and in casting their votes. In 2011, Selina Hayat Ivy was elected Mayor of Narayanganj City Corporation. Ivy is the daughter of Chunka, a popular labour leader who won the Narayanganj municipality chair election in 1974 without the support of his own party, the then ruling Awami League (AL). This time the AL gave its support to Shamim Osman in the Narayanganj City Corporation polls, despite Osman facing five criminal charges including murder and theft (Hasan et al. 2011). In contrast, for the previous eight years Ivy had administered the municipality with apparent honesty, integrity and transparency. Ivy did not get her party backing for the mayoral race, although she had earlier served as a mayor in the now defunct Narayanganj municipality. Rather, she became popular among the people for her development work in the city. The media also played an important role in this election. *The Daily Star*, a Bangladeshi English newspaper, reported:

The win for Ivy is a win for the people and the media. From the moment Shamim Osman became a mayoral candidate, the media focused on his controversial past. The media took a clear stance that they would not back someone with a murky past, someone who controls the underworld in Narayanganj, someone whose cohorts control all kinds of illegal activities like extortion. On the other hand, the media projected the clear image of Ivy. A doctor who hails from a family of political heritage, who came back to the country after a stint in New Zealand, and who despite all the

political pressure and threats would not budge from the polls naturally grabbed media attention.

(*The Daily Star* 2011)

However, despite the various problems faced by Union Parishad female members, one study found that they became more critical and vocal about the problems they face because of the discriminatory attitudes of their male counterparts. Some women members do not consider themselves to be tokens, and object to being treated like dolls or showpieces (Nazneen and Tasneem 2010). Direct election to reserved seats in the Union Parishads has brought social legitimacy for women to represent women's issues and has thus strengthened their voice (Nazneen and Tasneem 2010). One women member said:

'Oh, they in the Parishad say, "Why does a poor woman have such a loud voice? Who is she?" And I remind them I was elected directly by people in three wards. I am there to represent their views. I have as much right to speak as they do.'

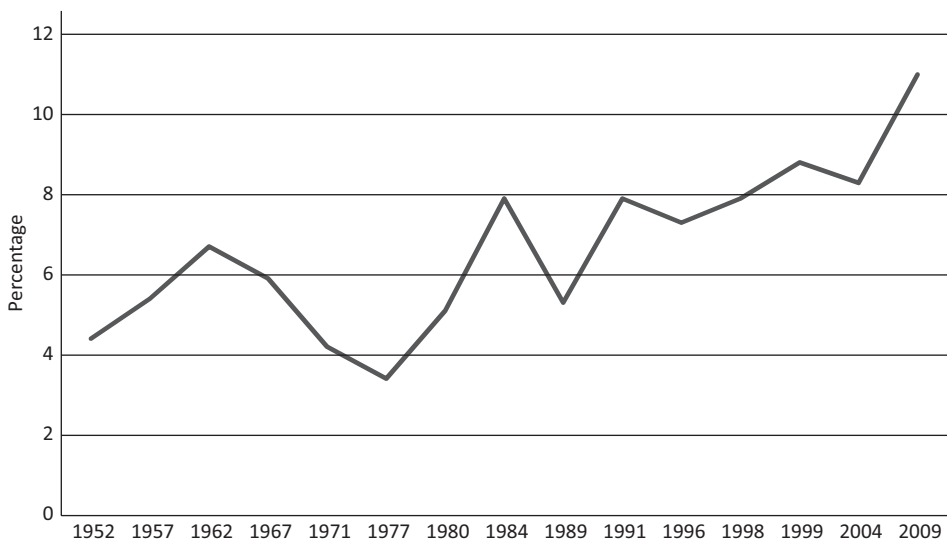
(Nazneen and Tasneem 2010)

4.3 India

4.3.1 Women in national politics

Despite having a number of prominent and powerful female politicians, women's political participation is very low in India. As of 2013, the female participation in the Lok Sabha (the House of the People/Lower House of the India Parliament) was only 11 per cent and in the Rajya Sabha (the Upper House of the India Parliament) it was just 10.6 per cent (Women in National

Figure 4.3 Percentage of women in Lok Sabha, 1952–2009



Source: Chhibber (2002: 412); *Deccan Herald* 2013; Women in National Parliaments (2013)

Parliaments 2013). The Council of Ministers has ten women members, two cabinet ministers, two ministers of state with independent charge, and six ministers of state (*Zeenews* 2012). The Indian government introduced a bill in the parliament that provided for 33 per cent of seats to be reserved for women in the Lok Sabha and in state level assemblies in 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2003, but due to powerful protests the bill did not proceed (Randall 2006). However, despite strong resistance from some political parties, the Rajya Sabha passed the bill on 9 March 2010. At the time of writing it had yet to be tabled in the Lok Sabha. Many political leaders have worried that their male-dominated parties would lose seats in favour of those parties counting more women in their ranks. Money and muscle power are increasingly required to contest the elections in India (State of Women in Urban Local Government India). A report says, 'Though India has a number of prominent and powerful female politicians, measures to increase women's political participation at all levels have proved difficult to enforce. Male politicians disqualified from politics have often exploited anti-discrimination legislation to have wives or relatives elected' (Chowdhury 2009).

In 2004, 5 of the 22 members of the Congress Working Committee and 4 out of 13 members of the Central Election Committee were women. Only one woman was on the Political Affairs Committee, which is concerned with party strategy (Randall 2006). The Congress only provides space to women who have political connections (Randall 2006). The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has even less commitment to the advancement of women. Randall reports:

In 2004, thirteen out of seventy-eight members of its national executive, one out of ten members of its parliamentary board and one out of sixteen members of its central election committee were women...The BJP leadership initially declared its commitment to the women's reservation bill but, faced with rebellion in the party ranks and among its coalition partners, increasingly stressed the need for consensus.

(Randall 2006)

4.3.2 Women in local government

As in Bangladesh, women in local government in India have had more success as they are readily accepted in city and community government, seen as an extension of their involvement and contribution to the communities. These women are recognised as transformative leaders – embracing the power to create change, defined by the issues they promote, their collaborative style of leadership, impact on equality and their ability to develop people and communities.

Table 4.3 Percentage of women in the Lok Sabha, 1952–2009

Year	1952	1957	1962	1967	1971	1977	1980	1984	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
%	4.4	5.4	6.7	5.9	4.2	3.4	5.1	7.9	5.3	7.9	7.3	7.9	8.8	8.29	11

Source: Chhibber (2002: 412); *Deccan Herald* 2013; Women in National Parliaments (2013)

However, women's political participation at the local government level is also very low in India. The government of India introduced the 73rd and 74th Amendment Bills in December 1992 to provide one-third reservations for women in rural and urban local government respectively. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment provides for a three-tier structure of panchayats; village level, intermediate level (composed of a block of villages) and district level. At each level, one-third of the total seats are reserved for women and must be filled by direct election. Before the constitutional amendment, some states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala had some reserved seats for women in village councils, but women were appointed in many cases (Sekhon 2006). The 74th Constitutional Amendment provides for one-third reserve seats for women by direct election in the municipal corporations in large urban areas, municipal councils in smaller urban settlements and local councils where the areas are in transition from rural to urban status (Krook 2009). In 2013, India has more than 500 district panchayats, about 5,100 block panchayats and about 225,000 village panchayats, 90 municipal corporations, 1,500 municipal councils and 1,800 nagar panchayats (Sooryarmoorthy and Renjini 2000). More than one million women were elected in the local government of India (Krook 2009). Krook (2009) writes:

Although the women elected to the municipal councils come mainly from higher castes and have higher levels of education and higher prestige professions, women in the rural panchayats frequently come from the lower castes, and are landless, illiterate, married and under the age of forty, with no prior political experience. These patterns indicate that ... these characteristics have had a range of negative implications for women's impact on rural government, as men have taken advantage of women's ignorance and lower social standing in ways that largely reinforce the existing gender and class order.

Patriarchal norms and structures are the main factors hindering women's effective participation in politics. Women's lack of education, the extent of housework and child-rearing activities, economic dependency and corruption are other factors (Sekhon 2006). Most of the women who were elected in the panchayats were from the dominant castes and had little political experience, and the majority of them were illiterate. Most of them were married, which means they were less fearful about their reputation. Sekhon (2006) writes:

...Many of the women were elected as proxies for their husbands or other male relatives who usually attended the panchayat meetings and made decisions. Many elected women never attended meetings, lacked knowledge of the new law and its provisions, and were often ignored or mistreated. They met with resistance particularly from upper-caste males, and were often subjected to violence, threats, bribery attempts, and charges of incompetence, no-confidence motions, and false rumors. Traditional political parties also reflect the hierarchical social structure of the villages and are reluctant to challenge it for fear of losing votes.

Non-governmental organisations play an important role in ensuring women's effective participation in local politics, especially at panchayat raj institutions. Panchayat raj is a system of governance in which gram panchayats are the basic units of administration. It has three levels: gram (village, though it can comprise more than one village), janpad (block) and zilla (district). NGOs provide education to raise awareness among the panchayat members, but one study found that women need more training from NGOs and that not all NGOs or all capacity-building strategies are equally effective in increasing the power of elected women. The study argues, 'Capacity building programmes for women are good, but it is also important that men get education about the importance of women in politics. Excluding men from these education programmes will never lead to complete change, as male attitudes contribute to the problem' (Giving Voice to the Voiceless).

Women's participation is low due to illiteracy, absences from panchayat meetings and lack of decision-making power. Moreover, their husbands work on their behalf (Vissandjee et al. 2005). One study on women councillors in Kerala found that husbands helped women to obtain party nominations to contest in elections. Their husbands interfere in their decision-making and limit their political freedom (Sooryarmoorthy and Renjini 2000). One panchayat member said, 'They [the government] enacted 30 per cent reservation for women. If a woman is Sarpanch [elected head of a panchayat], the actual work is done by her husband only because that much awareness is not there yet' (Vissandjee et al. 2005).

Female participants in a study on women's political participation in rural India stated that women are responsible for the household activities and might be capable of doing many things, but men have the real decision-making power. It is also believed that women have the responsibility of integrating the family and creating peace and harmony in the home. Bilkis et al. writes, 'The risk of bringing a bad name to one's household through even a single "inappropriate" action places an enormous amount of pressure upon women and necessarily limits their activities outside the household' (Vissandjee et al. 2005). Women's workload at home restricts their participation in politics. One women member said:

'My work has increased a lot. There are meetings every month, but I have only been twice. I told the secretary to come to my house and take my signature because I have so much to do in the house, looking after kids, household chores; if I have to attend meetings I will have to have someone to do my chores.'

(Vissandjee et al. 2005)

In India, the workforce participation rate of women in the rural sector is 28.9 while that for males is 54.8. In the urban sector, it is 13.8 for females and 55.4 for males. The total employment of women in the organised sector was 19.5 per cent in 2007 (Women and Men in India 2011). Women work longer hours

than men, and mostly do household and community work that is unpaid and invisible. One study reports:

...women spent about 2.1 hours per day on cooking food and about 1.1 hours on cleaning the household and utensils. Men's participation in these activities was nominal. Taking care of children was one of the major responsibilities of women, as they spent about 3.16 hours per week on these activities as compared to only 0.32 hours by males. There were far fewer women in the paid workforce than there were men. There were more unemployed women than there were unemployed men.

(Women and Men in India 2011)

As in Bangladesh, women in India cannot afford the expenses required for election campaigns, meetings and other expenditure for political purposes (Panday 2006). Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, violence against women increased and they fear sexual harassment and being beaten if they participate in elections and panchayat meetings (Shamim and Kumari 2002). Jayal (2006) reports:

Physical violence or the threat of it, as well as many shades of intimidation and outright coercion, are not uncommon. From Haryana in the north to Tamil Nadu in the south, women members of panchayats have faced threats of violence when they have expressed a desire to contest elections or, once elected, have insisted upon certain decisions. Sexual abuse is also not unknown. Other than rape and sexual abuse, it has also been found that women representatives who are efficient often attract slanderous allegations of sexual liaisons. In many states there have even been attempts to intimidate women into withdrawing from the election by insinuations of affairs with men. Violence against women representatives is, of course, generally worse when they also happen to be members of the scheduled castes or tribes. Gundiabai Ahirwar, the dalit Sarpanch of Pipra village in Tikamgarh district of Madhya Pradesh, was prevented from performing a ceremonial duty – hoisting the national flag in her village on Independence Day – because the Yadav (a backward caste) majority in the village thought that a dalit would pollute the national flag by touching it.

Despite the various problems women councillors face, the policy of reserved seats has created many opportunities for women in India. Joti Sekhon (2006) writes:

Several women have, however, emerged as assertive leaders and have become independent and effective as they have become better informed. They were more likely to be responsive to issues of drinking water, health, education, income generation, and pensions for widows, and in some cases, they have also taken up the issue of alcohol abuse. Gradually, many women have challenged limiting norms and practices.

Krook (2009) says the reservation policy has increased women's visibility in politics; many are becoming effective policy-makers and speaking out on issues such as education, health, domestic violence, child marriage and child labour. In many cases, rural women are able to discuss marital issues with women representatives but not with male representatives, and thus they inspire the women councillors to contest elections again (Krook 2009). Samarasinghe (2000) says of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment:

An act of parliament cannot be expected to change centuries old traditions overnight. At best it could be a catalyst for future change. What the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India has attempted to do is to open up a space at a level where such changes could begin to happen...Elected women representatives have been focusing on issues of the reproductive sphere, such as health and sanitary issues, safe drinking water and public welfare distribution system. Hence, at the village level, female political participation would bring the issues of the private sphere into the public sphere of politics as open, legitimate issues in a process of democratic self-governance. Female representation in elected office at the local level, such as the panchayat, opens a space for women to elevate issues of the reproductive sphere to the legitimacy of the public sphere.

In urban local governments, women members lack training in urban development issues and municipal administration. They do not have enough knowledge of municipal acts and rules and regulations, and they lack prior experience of dealing with urban development issues. They get little support from their senior male or female colleagues and municipal officials do not co-operate with them. Women do not have the necessary resources to contest elections and they face discrimination in party-level decision-making, which leaves them feeling insecure about political corruption and the use of 'money power'. Moreover, they lack confidence in public speaking, and family responsibilities prevent them from participating effectively (State of Women in Urban Local Government India). One study reports:

...women councillors perceive that big cities are becoming unsafe for women. They hesitate to perform public duties late at night when an emergency arises, or when violent situations like mob fighting or communal violence erupt in their ward. When there is no domestic or party support to assist them, most of them find it difficult to attend to such emergencies.
(Ghosh and Lama-Rewal 2005)

Most of elected women members are from the middle- or high-income classes. As a result, they are keen to protect their class interests rather than gender interests (Ibid.). Still, the provision for reservations opened up a considerable political space for women as candidates, party workers, supporters and voters (Ibid.) Women are affected by problems related to water, sanitation and environmental pollution. Women councillors try to solve those problems and they are generally sympathetic to women's difficulties. They use their status

and power to mediate in cases of harassment of slum women by the police and problems related to dowry, domestic violence, marital disputes, widow pensions and the like (Ibid.). Women's election to urban local government has increased their social respectability and provided them with the ability to solve the problems of ordinary people (Ibid.). NGOs play a role in raising consciousness. One study finds:

In Mumbai, several NGOs concerned with civic governance organised 'meet your candidate' meetings with local people, circulated information on the background of the candidates and highlighted the importance of the corporation in day-to-day life, so as to convince people to go and cast their vote. In Chennai, too, several Resident Welfare Associations concerned about the absence of educated middle-class citizen's in public life, fielded their members, including women, as candidates.

(Ghosh and Lama-Rewal 2005)

4.4 Conclusion

Although democracy requires that everyone be treated equally and as autonomous and self-determining persons, women in Bangladesh and India are lagging behind men in all areas. Regardless of having a number of prominent and powerful female politicians, women's participation in politics in both countries is very low. Despite the provision for reservation of one-third of the seats in local governments, women members are not able to participate effectively. Male control of both the public and private spheres hinders women's political participation. Women also feel insecure about the criminalisation of politics and use of 'money power', and frequently face discrimination from their male colleagues. They are often illiterate and unaware of rules, regulations and rights, which further hinders effective participation. Many women members are dependent on their husbands due to their lack of knowledge and experience. Fear of sexual and physical violence, corruption, economic dependency and domestic responsibilities are other factors that prevent women members of local governments in both Bangladesh and India from participating effectively.

Despite the various problems faced by female Union Parishad members in Bangladesh, the introduction of direct election to reserved seats brought them social legitimacy to represent women's issues, and thus strengthened their voice. Female Union Parishad members have been able to resolve family disputes and many have also participated in shalish, with some of them presiding over the sessions. Various NGOs and women's organisations offering training programmes on alternative dispute resolution and human rights have expressed support for women's participation in these shalish. Women in Bangladesh feel more comfortable discussing issues like marriage, divorce, domestic violence, dowry and polygamy with female Union Parishad members. The provision for reservations has increased their visibility in formal political and 'male' spaces.

In India, too, despite the various problems women councillors face, the reservation policy has created opportunities for them. Their visibility in politics has increased and many are becoming effective policy-makers and speaking out on issues such as education, health, domestic violence, child marriage and child labour. In many cases, rural women are more able to discuss their marital problems with female representatives than with male representatives. The provision for reservations in India's urban local governments opened up a considerable political space for women as candidates, party workers, supporters and voters. Women's election onto urban local governments has increased their social respectability, and provided them with an ability to solve the problems of ordinary people.

Moreover, the positive outcomes of women's participation in local governance in Bangladesh and India have increased visibility for women, healthy competition between women during communal elections, and heightened sensitisation on electoral processes. For women to fully maximise the opportunity to participate effectively in decision-making, certain changes have to be realised. Patriarchal norms and culture should be steadily eliminated through wide sensitisation. In order to remove negative attitudes towards women, awareness-raising programmes should be created and training provided to both male and female members. It is only when women feel they have sufficient knowledge that they will become confident enough to play a more important role in changing the lives of local people, and thus increase their visibility in politics. In addition, steps must be taken to eradicate political corruption and criminalisation and, most importantly, to guarantee women's security. When all of these measures are put in place, women will be enabled to participate effectively in politics in Bangladesh and India and the provision for reservations can become an effective model for women in governance across the rest of Asia.

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