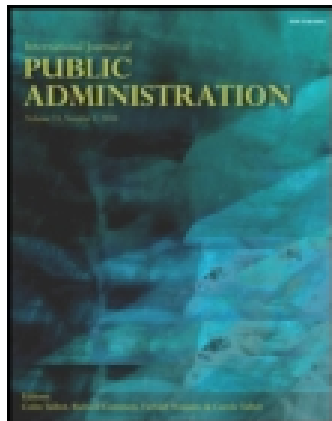


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Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh: Role of Women's Organizations

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Reviewing the history of women's movement, this article expects to find a large role of women's organizations in the process of change that has helped to increase participation of women in local government political process of Bangladesh. While there is considerable support for the presence of the women's movement, there is much ambivalence as to the specifics of such influence: its objects, means, and magnitude. The difficulty in assessing influence may stem from the reliance on informal channels, which makes tracing and tracking influence a great challenge, and calls for more grounded research to expose the intricate interactions between actors.

Keywords: women, political participation, women organization, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

The eradication of discrimination against women has for long been hailed as one of the indicators of good governance and social development internationally (United Nations, 1995). Despite much effort, discrimination is still pervasive in most developing countries. In particular, the process of involving women in public life through gender quotas has started slowly, often after persistent demands from domestic and external players. Even when there are changes, they are either uneven or difficult to sustain (UNIFEM, 2006). One may wonder why female representation is important in politics. Dahlerup (1978, 2003) and Phillips (1995) have presented three arguments in this regard: (i) women comprise half of the population, thus it is their right to have half of the seats (the justice argument); (ii) women have a varied experience (biological or socially constructed) than men that must be represented (the experience argument); and (iii) women and men have partly conflicting interests, thus men cannot represent women (the interest group argument).

In addition, another argument stresses the endogeneity of women's groups in that increasing the number of women politicians will encourage more women to take part in politics through serving as role models. Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti (1999) and Kudva (2001) suggest that women are less corrupt than men so that more presence of women in politics should bring "cleaner"—and thus better, politics.

A major interest in the literature on women's political participation has hence been on understanding the processes of change and, specifically, on the actors driving the change towards a higher degree of women's political participation. What characterizes the most effective strategies and how have they evolved? One type of "change agents" which has drawn considerable attention in the literature is the women's organizations (WOs). Given the nature of WOs—that their *raison d'être* lies in the women's cause—the WOs promise to be a major centre if not *the* center from which events on the women's cause flow. How do WOs assemble allies and neutralize sources of resistance? In other words, how does the WOs work for a cause in societies where animosity dominates and friends are few or weak? Studying the WOs allows us not only to appreciate the role of a major actor in promoting political participation of women, but also an avenue to understand the larger process of change with regard to women's role in society.

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One emphasis is on the impact of globalization on women's movement (Metcalf, 2011; Moghadam, 2000; Naples, 2002). Through encouraging activism, globalization has made human—and women's—rights an issue of economic, social, and political reform in a larger number of countries especially in the developing world. Movement of women's NGOs has played an important role in empowering women and developing their skills in employment, communication, as well as in advocacy and gender planning, and leadership (Al-Kazi, 2011). International labor codes and rights like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UN Bill of Rights for Women were taken as UN agenda and ratified by national governments as a result of consistent pressures from the women's NGOs and civil society organizations. These organizations also offer training programs for women and sponsor feminist actions at a grassroots level in what is described as transnational networking in multiple sites and multiple levels (Metcalf, 2011; Naples, 2002).

The literature on WOs in developing countries suggests that WOs have contributed to women's development in the following ways. First, WOs have addressed the supply deficit problem of basic goods and services through fostering self-help or providing direct services to women. The majority of WOs in developing countries was initially formed to respond to the needs of women for basic goods including food, education, and shelter (Carr, Chan, & Jhabrala, 1996; Moser, 1993; Visvanathan, Duggan, Nisonoff, & Wiegersma, 1997). Second, participation in the activities of WOs provided a means of empowerment for women. Third, WOs have been major players in the democratization process in many developing countries (Karl, 1995), if only because a more open and democratic society is, generally, more "women-friendly" (p. 19). WOs' role in the democratization processes is usually achieved through activities in three dimensions: (i) raising public awareness of discrimination against women (Fonjong, 2001); (ii) strengthening the organizational capacity of grassroots-level communities and democratic culture at the local level, and (iii) encouraging and facilitating women's participation in political activities (Carr et al., 1996; El-Bushra & Piza-Lopez, 1993; Goetz, 1995; Visvanathan et al., 1997). Despite the asymmetric representation of the two genders in political institutions in many developing countries, women have managed, during the last couple of decades, to exert *some* influence on events through a mix of social, economic, and political avenues (Greenberg, Della, Branca, & Julia, 1997; Jacqueline, 1994; Moser, 1993).

At the same time, as in other organizations, rivalries and competition within and amongst WOs can undermine the influence of WOs on women's political participation. Sometimes changes achieved at an earlier time are undone or weakened as coalition partners shift positions or lose their power. The women's movement in some Latin American countries has had an ironic downturn after the return to

democracy, for example. Major political parties which had worked closely with WOs during the democratic transitions were no longer interested in gender-related causes when in government. International donors supporting the women's movement as part of the political transition processes turned their attention to other more pressing issues. These twists and turns remind us of the embeddedness of women's movement in other, multiple, social processes, and the complex interactions of WOs with other actors, which are sometimes allies and, at other times, competitors, uninterested bystanders, or even sources of resistance. The role of WOs in promoting women's well-being involves a complex process that is far from fully understood.

This paper seeks to contribute to this understanding through assessing the role of WOs in a specific development: the enactment of the Local Government (Union Parishads (hereinafter UPs)) (Second Amendment) Act in 1997 in Bangladesh (hereinafter the 1997 Act). The 1997 Act is widely considered a milestone in the development of women's political rights in Bangladesh. The Act reserves one third of seats for women candidates in the UP, the third-and-the-lowest-tier government in the local government structure. Moreover, these seats will be filled, unprecedentedly, through direct election, thus conferring a high degree of legitimacy to their holders and also ensuring a higher profile for the candidates than in the case of election through a limited franchise. More specifically the paper tries to explore what have WOs done in the lead up to the 1997 Act that apparently has expanded phenomenally the space for women's political participation? How did the WOs interact with other related actors involved in the process of change? Was their role a central and critical one or peripheral?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative research strategy. The case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic and in-depth investigation is necessary (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). In this research, an exploratory and descriptive case study approach has been used because how, what, and why questions have been posed. The researcher has no control over events, while the focus has been on the contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 1994). In this regard, WOs and women's political participation have been selected as the main focus of the study. The reason for choosing the case-study method is related to the problem of this study, which altogether form a complex issue. As a matter of fact, the Act of 1997 was enacted in order to implement gender quotas in the electoral politics. Through the enactment of this act, a great amount of enthusiasm has been created among the women's community that has brought a radical change in the state of women taking part in the politics of local government bodies. In fact, it is a great opportunity to use this case for analyzing the role of WO for ensuring women's political participation in

Bangladesh. Thus, this strategy is most likely to be appropriate in dealing with the research questions and objectives of the current study.

This paper on WOs draws upon the research that was conducted as part of my PhD dissertation entitled “Institutional Reforms, Actors and Outcomes” at the City University of Hong Kong, which includes extensive fieldwork in 2007 in the Rajshahi District in the northern part of the country. Both primary and secondary data have been used in this paper. Primary data used in this paper were collected through an open-ended structured questionnaire, from leaders of four major WOs and 33 leaders of the major political parties.¹ As a matter of fact, a total of 230 respondents were interviewed during the whole fieldwork, including women members in the local government bodies, political parties, NGOs, WOs, and donors. All those data were used to write the dissertation. After the award of the degree, an attempt has been made to work on the role of individual actors in the reform process. As part of such endeavors, this paper has been written. One may ask about the validity of the data since it was collected in 2007? In response to this question, we would like to mention here that the Act of 1997 was enacted in order to introduce gender quotas at the local level. Thus, in order to explore the role of WO in the process of enactment of that particular Act, it is important that the views of those, who remained involved in the reform process, must be analyzed. From that perspective, an attempt has been made in this paper to explore the role of WO's in the process of the enactment of the Act of 1997 based on the views collected from those leaders of WOs and political parties during that time. Since the government is entrusted with the responsibility of making laws, perception of the leaders of the party in power (AL) has mostly been used with a very brief discussion of the role of opposition political parties in this regard. On the other hand, secondary data were collected from review of published documents, including books, book chapters, articles and internet browsing.

AGENDA, POLICY PROCESS, AND ACTORS: A THEORETICAL NOTE

It has already been mentioned earlier that the main thrust of this paper is to explore the role of a policy actor (WO) in the process of enactment of a particular policy (the Act of 1997) that aimed at enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh. Thus, it is relevant to find answer of a couple of questions: when a particular issue is put

on the government agenda and who are the actors in the policymaking process? In response to answer of the first question, the Kingdon's (1984) proposition of agenda setting can be referred to. He argued that when three events including “problem stream”, “policy stream,” and “political stream” interacts among themselves, a new window is opened that allows the proposal to be put on the political agenda. In the context of the present research, it is found that different international organizations and donors were highlighting issues relating to gender for a long time. Later on, Platform for Action was accepted as a policy at the Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, China, in 1995 for mainstreaming gender issues in social development. Finally, the issue of women's political participation received a big boost in Bangladesh through a change in the government ideology when the more progressive AL government came into power in 1996, replacing the government of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). As an outcome of interactions of these three streams, the issue of enhanced participation of women in politics was accepted by the government as an agenda to work on.

When it concerns the actors' involvement in the policy process, Howlett and Ramesh (1995, 2003) have talked about the inclusion of both state and societal actors in the policy process. Among different actors, some have close involvement in the policy process while others have marginal involvement. Policy subsystems are used as forums by policy actors for persuading and bargaining their interests through making discussion of policy issues. Recognizing the existence of individual and group actors in the policy process, Howlett and Ramesh (1995) have divided them into three broad categories, that is, the organization of the society, the organization of the state, and the organization of the international system. Being guided by the above theoretical proposition and sensing ground realities of the Bangladeshi policymaking environment in general, and women-related policymaking in particular, a set of actors has been identified who are thought to be influential in the process of the enactment of the 1997 Act.

From the category of state actors, the role of the government or elected officials is important since they reserve the legitimate authority to enact a law. On the other hand, different social actors, including political parties, WOs and nongovernmental organization (NGOs) deserve special mention since they are in a better position to fight for augmenting the process of women's political participation in Bangladesh. In a democracy, the power of political parties is immense since they form the government. From a theoretical point of view, political parties guide the government to perform their responsibilities. Thus, what political parties of Bangladesh have done for women's political empowerment is a critical issue that demands exploration. WOs in Bangladesh have remained vocal in advocating women-related issues, including their enhanced participation in the political process. Like women organizations, women are the focal point of

¹Four major WOs that were interviewed included Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), Narripokkho, Ain- O-Salish Kendra (ASK), and Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangtha (BNPS). Among 33 leaders of the major political parties, 12 were from the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), nine were from the Bangladesh Nationalist Parties (BNP), five from Jatiya Party (JP), and seven from the Bangladesh Jammāt-E-Islami (BJI).

majority of NGOs in Bangladesh. Thus, WOs and NGOs are thought to be important actors in the process of enactment of the 1997 Act. Finally, considering the aid dependent economy and lack of autonomy of the government, the role of donors and different international conventions has been chosen from the criteria of organization of the international system. Explicating the role of different actors in a single paper is really difficult. Thus, a modest attempt is made in this paper to explicate the role of WOs in the process of enactment of the Act of 1997, which is considered as a notable initiative for enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh.

GENDER QUOTAS AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: A CONCEPTUAL DEBATE

Research on gender quotas is a recent phenomenon since countries started to adopt gender quotas as a response to the 1979 CEDAW (Baldez, 2006). As a matter of fact majority of these policies have been introduced immediately before and after the United Nation Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Krook, 2006). Quotas for women as well as other kinds of affirmative action represent a historical shift away from the simple principle of *equal opportunity* with the principle of *equality of results* (Dahlerup, 2001). Consequently, in most of the Third World countries, women have sought autonomous organizational expression and transcendence from party lines. This suggested a maturing of women's political status and legitimacy as an electoral constituency.

Scholars like Baldez (2006), Dahlerup (2004), Kittilson (2005), and Nanivadekar (2006) have explained how and why quotas have been adopted by different countries and why some of them have achieved greater success in promoting women's access to political office than others: gender quotas have benefitted women through promoting equality of results and establishing gender as a category of political representation. However, opposing scholars like Goetz (1998, 2002) have argued that privileging women over others undermines the principle of equality of opportunities. Also a mere increase in the number of women in politics does not necessarily imply a change in policy outcomes. These criticisms, of gender quotas notwithstanding, the general agreement is still that the introduction of affirmative action and gender quotas is of immense importance in enhancing women's welfare, especially in the context of patriarchy and male-dominated social structure of developing countries where women are victims of all sorts of discrimination.

Governments in various developing countries have gradually introduced gender quotas and other affirmative actions as a result of global pressures and consistent demands from domestic and international women's movements. In the 1970s, women's representation in the elected and appointed bodies remained very low, and there was an absence of

women's political parties in most countries. At that time, the main theme of research on women and politics concentrated around the issue of women's marginalization in these arenas. The subsequent emergence of new feminist movements and the increasing trend of women's and feminist organizations encouraged researchers to broaden their work to less conventional, nonelectoral, settings of the women's movement (Beckwith, 2000).

Women and feminist movements of recent years have experienced a lack of definitional agreements (Beckwith, 2000). Jahan (1995) identifies three major strands of women's movements in Bangladesh: women's rights activist groups, women's research and advocacy organizations, and women's NGOs. However, she excluded other groups whose work focuses on social welfare or charity, or those groups that only provide services such as credit or health care. Keeping her focus on the Bangladeshi context, she explicates the relationship of the movement to other political actors, including nonfeminist NGOs, antifeminist political parties, and nonfeminists political elites. Focusing on the fragmentation of women's activism in Kenya, Odoul and Kabira (1995, p. 189, cited in Beckwith, 2000, p. 435) define the women's movement as "the emergence of women's groups," which they include "the actions of individual women." On the other hand, the women's movement in the Philippines has been defined by Quindoza Santiago (1995) as "any action undertaken by institutions, groups, organizations, or individuals that results in social change favorable to women as a whole" (pp. 111–112). Recognizing the varied definitions of women's movement, Kumar (1995) describes the Indian Women's movement as "a sum of campaigns around issues of importance to women, [campaigns that] fed into a network of women's groups and were part of a process of change and development in feminist thinking" (p. 58).

Despite having different definitions, it is very difficult to come to consensus on a particular definition of women's movement since it varies depending on the national and state structures, cultural contexts, and issues. When discussing the women movement in Bangladesh, Jahan (1995) employs a relatively broad definition:

women's movement are organized activities that question the legitimacy of the basic tenets of Bangladeshi social structure that support male domination and female subordination; that protest the values, customs, practices, laws, and institutions designed to impose, maintain, and perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and existing gender relations in the family, community, workplace, society, and the state; and that engage in collective action to change societal values and attitudes to realize a gender-just society. (p. 88)

Based on this and above definitions, a working definition of women's movement in the context of this study can be drawn by stating that women's movement is an ideology based on organized group effort by WOs that intend to bring changes in the state of women's political participation

in Bangladesh. It is important to mention here that the main thrust of the paper is to assess the role of WOs in introducing gender quotas for women in the local government bodies through a constitutional amendment. Thus, this working definition of women's movement is likely to be appropriate in the context of the present study.

POLITICAL CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh achieved its independence from Pakistan on 16th of December, 1971, through a bloody war that lasted for nine months. Since then, the country has been ruled by different types of regime. A democratically elected government headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman ruled the country until August 15, 1975 when he was assassinated by a group of military. From 1976 to 1990 the country remained under the rule of army mostly dominated by General Ziaur Rahman and General H. M. Ershad, respectively. Democracy restored for the second time in the late 1990s through overthrown by General Ershad, and a democratically elected government started to rule the country from 1991 onwards that continued until late 2006. A political turmoil again took place in late 2006 centering on the issue of formation of Care Taker government responsible for conducting free and fair election in the country. That political turmoil opened an opportunity for an army backed caretaker government to take over the state authority on January 11, 2007, that ruled the country until early January, 2009, when they were replaced by an elected government headed by the AL leader Sheikh Hasina through an election held on December 29, 2008. Since after restoration of democracy in 1991, power remained concentrated among the AL and the BNP. Two other political parties that have been successful in establishing their presence in the national level politics are Jatiya Party (JP) and Bangladesh Jammāt-E-Islami (BJI).

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

of convenience rather than ideological affinities determines the relationship among political parties in Bangladesh. For instance, there was hardly any communication between the BNP and JP in the Fifth Parliament (1991–96) despite their ideological affinities (Ahmed, 2003). In contrast, the AL and JP are having an alliance (in the mid-1990s and 2009 onwards) despite having obvious ideological differences. Another interesting example of such "marriages of convenience" was the alliance between AL and JIB in 1996. This occurred when they acted together to organize a movement against the BNP government, even though they stood ideologically opposite to each other.²

Partly as a result of this history of women's movement, the landscape of women's political participation in Bangladesh is a complex one. Despite prevalent social discrimination, women were not entirely absent from public and political life, including a small presence in the national Parliament and cabinets since the first government after independence.³ The 1972 Constitution included a provision of 15 reserved seats for women in the 315-seated national parliament. Reserved seats for women in Parliament in 2012 now stand at 45, 13% of the total number of seats. However, participation of women in the direct elections to the general seats, which women as well as men candidates contest, has remained very limited. From the first election in 1973 to the eighth election in 2001, not more than seven women candidates managed to win general seats in each election. In the 2008 election, 20 women won. In addition, the post of "Vice-Chairman" has been made reserved for women in 482 Upazila Parishad (second tier of local government) through enactment of the Upazila Parishad Act, 1998 (Amendment and Reintroduction) Act, 2009.

In the course of country's politics, women have also participated in the implementation of development-related policies at the local level, mostly through nongovernment organizations. Of course, two women prime ministers, Sheikh Hasina (1996–2001, 2009–now) and Khaleda Zia (1991–96, 2001–06) have for long dominated the politics of Bangladesh.⁴ However, as they are members of politically powerful families, their large role in politics has

²During the latter part of BNP's tenure (1991–96) in state power, the JIB curtailed its alliance with BNP. In turn, the latter supported AL which organized an antigovernment movement demanding a provision for the caretaker government to hold a free, fair, and credible election in 1996. Finally, the BNP government had to step down from state power after making a constitutional amendment which provided for the establishment of the caretaker government. In that election, the AL secured 146 seats, which eventually formed the government because they received unconditional support from JP who secured 32 seats, while the BNP secured only 116 seats.

³The percentages of women ministers in the cabinets of successive regimes are 4% (1972–75), 3% (1979–81), 4.5% (1982–96), 7.7% (1991–96), 8.7% (1996–2001), 5% (2001–06), and 13.9% (2009–present) (Chowdhury, 1994).

⁴Sheikh Hasina's father, Sheikh Muzibur Rahman, was the founder and the first prime minister of Bangladesh. Begum Khaleda Zia's husband, General Ziaur Rahman, was the president of Bangladesh.

been perceived as largely “exceptional” cases and will not ensure significant advances in public life for the “ordinary” women (Fleschenberg, 2008; The Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, 2000). Patriarchy has permeated the emergence of women in political leadership in Bangladesh, and women political leaders have had to play by the norms of their male-dominated families (Richter, 1991). It is important to mention here that this is not the case for Khaleda and Hasina only. If we look at the politics of the subcontinent, it will be evident that many of the women—and men—leaders have been making leaders by virtue of their family relations instead of their own personal quality only. For instance, the ex-prime minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, was made the leader of Congress Party due to death of his mother, Indira Gandhi. Even in Bangladesh, if we look into the politics, we will find several instances of such nature. The son of the current President of Bangladesh Advocate Abdul Hamid, who was a businessman, was nominated by the AL to contest Parliamentary election in 2014. Family connections are a significant factor in political leadership, regardless of gender.

WOs IN BANGLADESH: HISTORY AND PROFILES

In postindependence Bangladesh, the WO with the longest history is Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), which was initially a forum for female activists during the student politics and the preindependence movement in the 1960s. Broadening its power base with new chapters across the country since independence, BMP has developed relatively well-defined positions in a wide range of policy areas to combat discrimination against women. It was also a major player in the heightened activism after the 1995 Women World Conference in Beijing, China, when WOs in Bangladesh and other countries stepped up their demand for a higher level of participation of women in politics and policymaking. Apart from BMP, a number of other WOs [Naripokkho (NP), the Aion-O-Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh Nari Progati Shanghai (BNPS)] have persisted in advocating equal rights for women and combating gender discrimination and violence against women. Another WO called Women for Women, which was established in 1973 by a group of committed women professionals, has been carrying out extensive research and study in areas of women's social, economic, and political life (Kabir, 2003b). Table 1 below shows the history, organizational profile, and ideological affiliation of four more prominent WOs in Bangladesh.

Given the prevalence of Islamic values in Bangladeshi society, one may wonder why WOs with Islamic ideology have not been selected for interview. As a matter of fact, women upholding Islamic values do not believe in women's greater access in the public arenas. Thus, it is very difficult to find organizations of such nature in Bangladesh. Of course,

BJI, as a political party, has its own women's wing, but they are not prominent in the public arenas. Moreover, women's wings of the political parties were not considered for interview. But, this is for sure that there is an obvious difference between WOs organizations with secular values and WOs with Islamic values when women's political participation is concerned. The former has always strived for women's greater visibility in public arenas and advocated the elimination of all discrimination against women eventually while the later want to keep women's role in politics “under veil”.

Soon after independence in 1971, a few urban-based WOs started to be active on women's welfare in the countryside, working on issues such as combat violence against women and discrimination. Mobilization of rural women was, however, erratic and took place mostly during elections only. Nevertheless, by around 1990, a number of changes had become noticeable. First, the number of active WOs more than doubled from about 10 in the 1970s to 35 in 2010. Second, there was a shift from welfare to development in the work of most WOs. Third, WOs' activities were extended to the rural areas on a regular basis. The combined effect of these changes opened the door for many women to take part in regular meetings and activities on a scale impossible in the 1970s.

Since the 1990s, several WOs such as the BMP, ASK, NP, and BNPS have been especially active. Apart from the traditional women-related issues,⁵ these organizations have expanded the scope of agenda to include development-oriented issues such as debt, environment, population control, women's health, legal reforms, and women's political participation in various levels of the government.

There have been a few success stories, historically, of WOs influencing government policies. In 1988, the constitution was amended to make Islam the state religion, at a time when the military government relied on religion for legitimacy. WOs were vocally against it, but failed to stop the amendment from getting through.

The campaign against the constitutional amendment in 1988 lifted the women's movement to a new level, and several WOs became especially active during that period and thereafter. Oikyaabaddha Nari Samaj (United Women's Forum), which was a coalition of about 20 WOs, at that time submitted a 17-point demand for women's rights to the government.⁶ NP played a vital role in building the

⁵Issues drawing most acute concern are rape, dowry, violence, wife abuse, and women trafficking.

⁶In 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 ILO 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).

TABLE 1
Profile of Women's Organizations

| <i>Name of the organization</i> | <i>Year of formation</i> | <i>Work emphasis</i> | <i>Strategies</i> | <i>Party affiliation ideological inclination</i> |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) | 1970, during the war for independence | A countrywide network; Active in social campaigns to enhance women's rights in social, economic, and political spheres; Having achieved a well-defined position on women's issues over a broad range of policies; Active in lobbying the government to enact women-friendly policies and laws | Training, research and arrangement of different types of movement (protest, rally, human chain, etc.) | Secular and democratic values; Leaders maintain good relations with Awami League whose leaders sharing similar values. |
| Narripokkho | 1983 | Reproductive rights and population policies; violence against women; women's human rights; cultural politics and the representation of women; and gender issues in development. | Conducting research, training, and workshops | Most founders had been involved in leftist and secular politics at a young age; |
| Ain-O-Salish Kendra (ASK) | 1986 | Legal services to the disadvantaged including women (legal aid, mediation, and public interest litigation) | Offer Legal Aid services to those who do not have the capacity to avail it, go to Court against any decision that is discriminatory to the women's community and advocacy | Main guiding principles are equality, democracy, human rights, justice, and gender equity; Nonpartisan formally, yet good family and school-based relationship between the founders and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina |
| Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangtha (BNPS) | 1986 | Rights of women and marginalized groups, including sex workers and ethnic minorities. | Advocacy | Inclusion, plurality, and secularism being its main guiding principles |

Sources: Compiled from information contained in Kamal (2010), <http://www.mahilaparishad.org>; http://www.askbd.org/web/?page_id=420; and http://bnps.org/?page_id=6; accessed on 3 November 2010.

coalition and organizing the movement. The Forum protested against the collusion of the state and religion and the 1988 Amendment to the Constitution. It also participated in the mass upsurge in 1990 that overthrew the military government of President Ershad (1982–90). BMP developed its own legal aid cells and expanded its fleet of dedicated workers. A high point of this period is the government's ratification of the CEDAW, as a result of these WO agitations (Chowdhury, 1994).

Another indication of WOs' influence was the winning of a writ petition in the High Court in 2004 by ASK and BLAST. The writ challenged a circular of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives (MLGRD&C) that sought to exclude local female ward commissioners from key functions such as serving in the Law and Order Committee, issuing certificates relating to succession and nationality, and overseeing local infrastructure projects. The Ministry argued that women ward commissioners were elected from reserved seats, while their male counterparts were from general seats. The circular was declared illegal by the High Court, which certified that both male and female ward commissioners have equal powers and opportunities to perform their duties (ASK, 2005, cited in World Bank, 2008).

Over the years the women's movement in Bangladesh has gained further momentum. In preparation for the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing, a coalition was formed among leading WOs based in Dhaka, the national capital, and the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), which worked in different parts of the country—the first alliance of a similar kind in Bangladesh's history. Dialogs, studies and research, focus group discussions and workshops/seminars were organized. Different ideas were articulated, and a relationship was formed among the organizations. Such a process apparently enhances the capacities of both the Dhaka-based WOs and grassroots organizations, which become more inclusive and capable to assess their own strengths and weaknesses from others' perspectives. This in turn makes the organizations more effective in lobbying the government over women's well-being (Kabir, 2003b).

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (UNION PARISHAD) (AMENDMENT) ACT 1997

Despite having different clauses in the Constitution (articles 9, 10, 19 (1), (2), 27, 28 (1) (2) (4) in favour of safeguarding

women's equal rights against all sorts of social and economic discrimination in the society, the state of women's participation in the country before 1997 was very meager. Before 1997 there was reservation of seats for women in the political level, however, they were either filled by nomination or indirect election. In this regard, the enactment of the 1997 Act is a landmark development. The 1997 amendment provides for direct election by universal adult suffrage to the three women-only reserved seats, in which male candidates are not allowed to compete. For the first time in the history of women's political participation in Bangladesh, women candidates are thus able to contest direct elections with fellow women only, providing the elected women an equal claim to legitimacy and political powers and rights as their male colleagues (Sultana, 2000).

Several other changes in the composition of the UPs were introduced through the Act of 1997, apart from the provision of direct election for the reserved seats. One is the territorial demarcation of wards for women members. The nine wards for general members are grouped into three larger wards for the purpose of election of women members in the reserved seats. This entrusts serious responsibilities upon the women members as their constituency is three times bigger than a general member's constituency. The Act did not spell out the specific duties and responsibilities of a woman member in the UP, but this lapse was remedied shortly after the Act came into effect through administrative orders.

The new provisions for direct elections were met with enthusiasm in the women's community. In the election of 1997, 44,134 women contested the reserved seats, and 13,437 were elected. Only 592 were elected unopposed, suggesting the competitiveness of the election (Islam, 1987). In the 2003 election, 39,419 women contested 12,669 quota seats in the 4223 UPs where elections were held (Steps towards Development, 2003). Women have participated in popular elections on a scale unprecedented in the past political history of Bangladesh.

ENACTMENT OF THE ACT OF 1997: ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF WOs

What specific role did the WOs play in the enactment of this important Act, which proved critical to extending women's political participation? Despite the longstanding women's movement, assessing the extent of WOs' influence over specific policy developments is more difficult than expected. In the case of the 1997 Act, which has enabled a significant upsurge of women participating in local elections, the role of WOs may be described as pervasive and yet ambiguous. On the one hand, most national political leaders would readily acknowledge the relevance of the women movement, claiming that "the movement for greater women's participation has been taken into consideration during the

enactment of the Act of 1997".⁷ At the same time, leaders of the major WOs were divided as to whether, notwithstanding decades of work on promoting women's rights, they had in fact made any *genuine* difference to the course of events over the 1997 Act.⁸ Doubts of their own influence were often attributed, by the WO leaders, to the lack of formal mechanisms of communications between the WOs and the major decision-making forums.⁹ There was, and still is, no representation of WOs in government committees where decisions on women's issues were made. WOs have relied largely on personal relationship with the government. With no direct and formal solicitation of their inputs during the decision-making process, it is difficult to establish a clear linkage between WOs' services and activities and changes in policies.

Another factor contributing to the feeling of impotence in bringing *genuine change* among the WOs is the large gap between policy and practice, or policy as formulated and policy as implemented on matters concerning women welfare. There had been cases, for instance, when WOs were able to convince the government to change its policy, only to have the policy change "nullified" in effect at the implementation level. An informed leading member of a major WO in the country, Narripokkho, told this story to us,

In Bangladesh, when a girl or woman is raped, her medical examination is usually conducted in district-level hospitals, not at the rural medical centers even if the rape 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. The practice of examination at district hospitals, thus works against the interest of the rape victims.

During 2001 and 2002, we organized a strong movement against this system. We demanded that examinations should take place locally nearest the scene of the crime, since it may take hours to reach the district hospitals. Narripokkho was able to convince the responsible authorities in charge of policy decisions on this issue. A government circular was issued in 2002 to require medical tests to be conducted at the Upazila-level (second tier of local government) health center. However, the decision has not yet been implemented till now.¹⁰

The failure in implementation in developing countries has been well documented (Khan, 2004; Khundker, 2007; Sobhan, 2002). Developing countries face grave problems of state capacity, especially at the local levels, where most services need to be delivered. As women welfare often hinges upon the quality of public services, the weak capacity of local government and agencies means that even if

⁷As an example, nine out of the 12 AL leaders we interviewed shared this judgment.

⁸In-depth interviews with leaders of five major WOs.

⁹Interviews with WO leaders, 2007.

¹⁰Authors' interviews, 2007.

policy may be improved at the national level, the translation between policy and practice is fraught with difficulties. In the case of local healthcare in Bangladesh, the system has faced with multiple problems: serious shortage of physicians, a slack work culture—negligent attitudes towards patients and high absenteeism, inadequate supplies of medicine and equipment, shortage of beds, poor ambulance services, and absence of a proper referral system between hospitals and different specialist services (Prince, 2001). Aggravating the weak local capacity is its neglect, in the national government in particular. It is not uncommon that national policymakers promulgate regulations without considering implementation capacity. Policymakers have largely confined their responsibility to making policies only, leaving implementation to *others*. They also tend to neglect that they have a role in monitoring implementation. The resultant large implementation gap and the complex problems underlying it suggest that improving women's welfare and rights involves multiple processes which the efforts of the WOs constitute only part of. A degree of ambivalence has thus prevailed as to the *precise* impacts WOs' activities have brought to bear on government policy *in practice*, despite their longtime presence.

One way to reconcile the dual perceptions of the importance and relevance of women's movement is through specifying *what* the WOs have done over specific decisions. What activities have been executed by the WOs in relation to the changes to women's political participation provided by the enactment of the 1997 Act? What did the WOs do in the lead up to the Act, subsequent to its enactment and during the local UP elections?

First amongst all was the suggestion, put forward by a number of WOs, of introducing direct election arrangement to local seats reserved for women during the campaign to dethrone the military government under General Ershad (1982–1990) in the late 1980s. WOs working under the common banner of the Oikyabaddha Nari Samaj (which means the United Women's Society) (OBNS) in 1988 outlined a 17-point program to improve women welfare and rights in a full range of legal, social, economic, and political arenas.¹¹ Featuring amongst the 17 demands was one on reservation of seats for women in the national Parliament and local government (UP) elected through direct election. The campaign precipitated the downfall of the military regime and the return to a democratically elected government in 1991. A more liberal media and relaxed political environment in the 1990s also worked in favor of the women's movement, as WOs' advocacy activities were more extensively reported, helping to raise awareness of the systematic injustice facing women both in the society at large and in the government (Zaman, 1999).

¹¹The WOs include Jatiya Mahila Ainjibi Samiti, Ain O Salish Kendra, Samajtantrik Mahila Forum, Bangladesh Nari Mukti Sangshad, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, and Women for Women.

During the 1990s, a large variety of activities were pursued to continue demands, including the improved representation of women in the national and local governments (Zaman, 1999). These range from "conventional" activities such as communal meetings, informal exchange of views with MPs and government officials, petitions and submission of memoranda, to social actions including human chain actions, demonstrations, and signature campaigns. Different WOs commissioned researches on different aspects of women's political participation and publicized findings through press conferences and publications. From time to time litigations were used to push for specific changes.¹²

It is worth mentioning that despite the lack of formal communication channels with the Government, leaders of some WOs have had good access with senior government officials, including the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (1996–2001), through personal relationship. Here sharing a common political history appears to be instrumental. Most leaders of WOs had had a long history of political involvement. Many were involved in leftist political parties and were active during the preindependence liberation war. These early common political experiences forged friendships and allowed a degree of mutual access and influence amongst the members. The then Prime Minister Hasina, daughter of the first President of Bangladesh and chairperson (since 1981 till now) of the "centre-left" political party Bangladesh AL, had been a political activist as a young student in the liberation movement and the women's movement. Drawing upon a common political history and interpersonal friendships, WO leaders often directly contacted the then Prime Minister and requested her to take an initiative on women's political participation.¹³

Prime Minister Hasina has admitted her personal interest and commitment to extending women's political participation in an interview:

[T]he enactment [of the 1997 Act] was in my mind for a long time. I was committed to do this before I came to power. We highlighted the issue of women's political participation in our election manifesto also. From the very beginning of my involvement in politics, I was vocal on this issue. But we remained (out of) power for a long time. As you know, in Bangladesh, you cannot do anything while in opposition. The party in power does not take into account the opposition's suggestions. While in the opposition, I urged the government several times to take the initiative to enhance women's political participation, but they did not respond to our demands. That is why I started the procedure to enact the

¹²In 2004 several WOs went to the Court to protest against the decision of the BNP government under Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to reserve only 45 seats for women in the Parliament. Joining hands with the then opposition political parties (including AL led by Hasina), they demanded at least 64 reserved seats for women and the introduction of direct election to these seats. However, they lost the case finally (The Daily Star, 20. 07. 2005).

¹³Authors' interviews with WOs, 2007.

reform of 1997 after a few days of my (taking oath) as Prime Minister.¹⁴

The relationship between the role of the WOs and that of the then Prime Minister is succinctly captured by this remark by a top leader of AL:

Most of the prominent leaders of WOs were very close to the Prime Minister. They had a personal connection with her, which offered them easy access. They convinced the Prime Minister that she should take an initiative to increase women's participation. Since the Prime Minister herself was interested in the subject matter, their suggestions motivated her to initiate the processes leading to the 1997 reform.¹⁵

Similar social networks are found among WO leaders and some other senior government officials. One example is late Ivy Rahman, political activist and former president of the Bangladesh Women AL and wife of the the Minister of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives during the AL Government (1996–2001).¹⁶ Given Rahman's political background, she had friends and associates in the WO network, for whom she had helped to relay messages to her husband, other senior government officials, and Prime Minister Hasina. The following remarks of a WO leader indicate how the network had worked:

When we were not able to reach the Prime Minister, we communicated with [Ivy Rahman] who then either conveyed our message to the Prime Minister or managed her appointments so that we could meet her. We used to meet Mr. Rahman through Ivy Rahman . . . He had an important role to play since the matter [of the 1997 Act] was under the jurisdiction of his ministry. He then conveyed our message to the Prime Minister and other members of the Cabinet as well as Party Forum.¹⁷

Having multiple points of access certainly enhances WOs' influence on the government, which is especially important given the lack of formal channels of participation in the policymaking process. On the other hand, the influence on government policy of WOs as a collective force had been weakened by partisan or ideological differences amongst the major WOs. Each political party has its own "women's affairs wing" to work for the welfare of the women's community.¹⁸ Whilst this suggests the relevance of women's

issues in mainstream partisan politics, the party-affiliations of these women's groups also create tensions within the WO network, as the groups' loyalty to the women's movement often conflict with their duty to preserve the interest of the political party they are allied with. However, one may wonder to what extent the women's wing of political parties is integrated and active in the strategic development. As a matter of fact, political parties in Bangladesh are largely authoritarian entities in term of internal decision making processes and practice. The Chief of the parties often exercises supreme power over party affairs and it is the exception rather than the rule to have someone raising a dissenting voice against the party chief. In such a situation, it can be ascertained that women's wings of the political parties are not in a position to influence the decision making process. In any event, the consequent diverse agenda and work priorities of the WOs often distracted attention and made inter-agency collaboration difficult. One WO leader so describes the coordination problems:

WOs are not united in pressing their demands. Sometimes, a meeting is held to decide on a strategy of actions, but it is difficult to come to an agreement. Reaching consensus seems difficult due to variations in the work foci and the nature of the WOs. Organization's work on different gender related issues; draw up different work plans and programs. These all obstruct them from reaching a consensus on what needs to be done collectively, right now, to further women's rights. Each would put forward a different priority. If the WOs organized their movements collectively, then their work would gain more momentum, which could have influenced the government to a greater extent.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the difficulties within the Movement, the lack of formal channels of participation in policymaking, and an ambivalent evaluation of effectiveness, the WOs have appeared to be undeterred, preferring to focus on expending more efforts rather than assessing the return of previous efforts. Against all odds, the WOs are determined to make their voices heard. Below is a typical representation of this resilience:

Whether we can influence the government or not, whether our demands are accepted by the governments or not, we shall remain engaged in building awareness among women with the expectation that these women will eventually raise their voice 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.²⁰

At the end of discussion in this section, a brief analysis on the role the major opposition parties in the process of the enactment of the Act deserves importance. The finding suggests

¹⁴ Authors' interview, Dhaka, July 2007.

¹⁵ The respondent was also a former MP (1996–2001). Authors' interview, 2007.

¹⁶ The Bangladesh Women Awami League is the women wing of Bangladesh Awami League. This organization remains active about women's rights.

¹⁷ Authors' interviews, Dhaka, 2007.

¹⁸ For instance, Bangladesh Mahila (Women) Awami League is a front women wing of the AL while Bangladesh Nationalist Women Party is the front women wing of the BNP.

¹⁹ Authors' interview, Dhaka, 2007.

²⁰ Authors' interviews with WO leaders, 2007.

that the BNP and JP did not have any sort of influence on the government when the act was enacted. JIB on the other hand neither tried to influence nor obstructed the process of ratifying the Act since their representation in the Seventh Parliament (1996–2001) was negligible.²¹ The main underlying cause is that the law-making process in Bangladesh is highly centralized. The party in power if it has majority in the Parliament bothers little about comments and suggestions of oppositions in the making of laws. As a matter of fact, the process starts in the ministry and gets approval in the Parliament without allowing opportunities for deliberation. More, BNP's alliance with the BJI resisted them from playing a proactive role on the issue of women's political participation. Thus, it can be asserted that the Act of 1997 was not an outcome of constant pressure from any of the individual actor. It does not necessarily mean that the government enacted the Act of 1997 from their own accord. In fact, different actors like WOs, NGOs, donor agencies, and international agencies remained vocal about the issue of women's greater participation in politics. Through different fora and activities, these actors created pressure on the government and influenced it to enact such a law.

CONCLUSION

The development of the gender quotas is a critical step towards making half of the total global population more equitably represented in the political process. However, introduction of gender quotas requires changes in the institutional design that is not at all an easy task. The movement of WOs is one of the important processes that have helped women gain a foothold in the political arenas. Their diverse definitions of women's movements notwithstanding, most analysts have come to a consensus that women's movements are organized efforts of WOs aiming at bringing changes to the state of women's position in the society. Like other countries of the world, WOs in Bangladesh have been working towards women's greater participation in politics for a long time.

In this article, we set out to review and assess the role of WOs in the enactment of a major legislation introducing gender quotas that has substantially raised the level of women's groups in local elections in Bangladesh, where a social culture of patriarchy and authoritarian politics coexist, somewhat uneasily, with competitive elections. Given the self-proclaimed missions of WOs, we believe the WOs should have played an important part in the process of change. A study to understand how WOs have worked towards their objective will not only illuminate on a major

part of the change process, but also inform directly the empowerment of a group of women—the WO members themselves.

Our findings have partially met our expectations. There is substantial support for WO's influence over government policies, either in terms of evidence on the scope and depth of WO activities, or subjective evaluations by politicians, WO participants, media, and academics. The women's movement is there and has made a difference to the politics and policies of Bangladesh. At the same time, considerable ambivalence remains as to the objects of influence, means of exerting influence, and the depth of impacts of WOs' activities. The absence of a formal participative framework not only makes WOs' access to influence difficult, it also poses additional challenges to the assessment of such influence. The structural approach of identifying and analyzing the actions and impacts, which is popular in policy evaluation studies, is largely irrelevant and inapplicable. An informal relation between government and WO actors was found to be of critical importance in enabling WO influence over women policy. Such findings corroborate with findings of Moody (2005) and Steinberg (2002) who insisted on the importance of consensus building through informal influence in policymaking. Also important was the historical experience of major actors—in forming one's ideas about preferences and priorities and shaping your network of policy actors, with whom your informal relations and interactions will be more important. One interesting observation, we have in our finding is that despite the difficulties in accessing policy influence, and the ambivalent note in some subjective evaluations of influence by some WO leaders, morale amongst the WOs has remained generally high. The Women Movement has gained steady momentum over the years, despite very substantial difficulties, against the odds of a still very conservative political and social culture. The salience of the informal networks and interactions between leaders in WOs, political parties, and government that this paper identifies may underline somehow the WOs' resilience, in that WOs have always enjoyed, to an extent, the tacit support of “allies” on a personal basis within the otherwise hostile political establishment.

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²¹JIB had only three Parliament members out of the total 330 (300 general seats and 30 seats reserved for women) seats in the Seventh Parliament (1996–2001).

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