

# Gender Equality and Women's Participation Issues in Bangladesh: Policy Framework Perspective

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## Abstract

*Gender equality is now universally recognized phenomenon in which women are speaking about gaining equal control over their lives, and participating in making the decisions that affect them in home and community, in government and international development policies. Over the last few decades Bangladesh has achieved commendable success in gender equality and women's participation issues. Women's mobility and visibility in public domain, both in the rural and urban areas have significantly improved. The constitution of Bangladesh has ensured equal rights in all spheres of life. Successive governments have therefore taken measures to promote gender equality in a progressive manner over time. Bangladesh is a signatory to many international conventions and agreements for women's equal rights and empowerment. The main objective of the present study is to make an overview of the policy framework on gender equality and women's participation in different levels of governance in Bangladesh. An attempt has been made in the study to assess the state of implementation of such policies along with various international agreements and their application in practice. The study also tries to find out all types of limitations and constraints faced in implementing such policies for gender equality and women participation in governance. At the same time, the study also attempts to provide some recommendations to overcome these limitations.*

**Keywords:** Gender equality, women participation, women development policy, national action plan, international mechanism.

## Introduction

Bangladesh emerged as an independent state through the blood bath of War of Liberation in 1971. The womenfolk of this country made a glorious contribution in the War of Liberation in many ways including

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active participation in freedom struggle and sending their husbands and siblings to war fronts. Our women started becoming self-reliant from the direct experience of War of Liberation. The journey to ensure participation of women and their equal rights began since the independence. The constitution of Bangladesh guarantees women's equal rights and prohibits discrimination and inequality on the basis of sex. Over the last four decades initiatives to ensure equal rights of women and non-discrimination have gained momentum in Bangladesh. Different governments have adopted appropriate policies, legislation, strategies, national plan of action and programs for realization of gender equality and women's participation in all spheres of life. Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW) in 1984, endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) in 1995 and Bangladesh committed itself to the goals and targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) without any condition. All policies, plans, programs and strategies of Bangladesh have been consistent with the international commitments and the government has regularly reviewed progress and reported on the attainment of these commitments. Despite having these legal guarantees, appropriate policies, plans and international commitments, Bangladeshi women are always facing deprivation in many areas including education, health, nutrition, employment, use of credit, access to assets, access to and control over technology as well as personal security.

Women have always been subject to discrimination and negligence in decision making process of local and national level governance for decades. All public policy efforts related to gender equality and women's empowerment suffer from a lack of human resources, extreme budgetary constraints, lack of sector specific experts, weak documentation and information dissemination system, poor data management system, inadequate and poor infrastructure and logistic support system, ineffective monitoring system, lack of coordination between different project activities, limited involvement of field officers in program and project design as well as in the broader strategy formulation processes. At present it is a main challenge for Bangladesh to translating all these policies in practice. Bangladesh should immediate start to take necessary policy reforms to overcome all types of limitations in this field.

### **Objective**

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- To portray the overall picture of national policies related to gender equality and participation of women in public life.
- To assess the impact of such policies along with various international agreements on gender equality and women's participation issues.
- To find out all types of limitations on the way of formulating and implementing such policies.
- To provide some remedies to overcome these limitations.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative and slightly quantitative methods have been followed in this study. The study is descriptive as well as suggestive in nature and based on secondary sources, e.g., journal articles, newspaper articles, annual reports of the government and international organizations, Government's publications, acts, policies and plans, and books published in the field. A wide range of web contents are browsed also.

## **Gender Equality and Participation of women: Conceptual Analysis**

Gender equality means that women and men enjoy the same status and have equal opportunity to realize their full human rights and potential to contribute to national, political, economic, social and cultural development, and to benefit from the results. According to BRIDGE (Development-Gender) report (2000), Gender equality denotes women having the same opportunities in life as men, including the ability to participate in the public sphere. USAID(2012) has stated that Gender equality concerns women and men, and it involves working with men and boys, women and girls to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviors, roles and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, and in the community. Genuine equality means more than parity in numbers or laws on the books; it means expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males or females. UNICEF (2000) has defined this concept as "Gender equality means that women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections". The other key concept is participation which recognizes the need to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their well-being. According to Mishra (1984:88), "participation means collective and continuous efforts by the people themselves in setting goals, pooling resources together and taking actions which aim at improving their living conditions". S. Rahman (1991:3) has stated that all forms of actions through which citizens take part in the operation of administration may be termed as 'participation'. Here,

‘taking part’ refers to any level from macro to micro region or it may be of any type e.g. advisory or in decision-making or in implementation etc. According to Human Development Report, “participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political process that affects their lives”(1993:1).

## **Literature Review**

To do this study I have reviewed some literatures on gender development and policy framework in Bangladesh. Dr. Salahuddin M. Aminuzzaman (2011) has tried to capture all policies related to gender and development as well as the state of compliance with Bangladesh Government’s international commitments. His study observed that all legal guarantees and institutional framework for women are in many cases blind to take cognizance of the socially disadvantaged position of women. Dr. Kaniz N. Siddique (2011) has made an attempt to see the critical question of how effectively gender-based discrimination and deprivation against women and women’s poverty perspectives have been incorporated in the formulation of National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction. Saba GulKhattak et al. (2008) has identified several efforts undertaken by Bangladesh toward integrating the women’s agenda into its broader policy and plan framework. Mohammad Ali Khan et al. (2008) has compiled a number of laws, provisions, plans and programs related to women affairs in Bangladesh. All these studies mainly focus on status of policy framework related to women in Bangladesh and these are very much relevant to this study. The broad objective of the present study is to find out the impact of all policy efforts on women’s participation in state and public life.

## **Policy Framework on Gender Equality and women’s participation Issues in Bangladesh**

### ***Fundamental Principles of State Policy (The Constitution of the People’ Republic of Bangladesh, 2011)***

Article 10, “Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life.”

Article 19, “The state shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens.”

Article 27, “All citizens are equal before law and entitled to equal protection of law.”

Article 28 (1), “The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.”

Article 28 (2), “Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life.”

Article 28 (4), “Nothing in this article shall prevent State from making Special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of the citizens.”

Article 29 (1), “There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect to employment or office in the service of the Republic.”

Article 29 (2), “No citizen shall, on grounds only of religious, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect to, any employment or in the service of the Republic.”

### ***National Women Development Policy (2011)***

In 2011 the Government declared 49-point National Women Development Policy, of which basic theme is to ensure gender equality and increase women’s participation in every sphere of life. The Objectives of National Women Development Policy 2011 are as follows:

- To establish equal rights of men and women in areas of state and public life in the light of the constitution of Bangladesh.
- To ensure security and safety of women in all areas of state, social and family life.
- To ensure the socio-economic, political, administrative and legal empowerment;
- To establish human rights of women.
- To ensure full and equal participation of women in the mainstream socio-economic development.
- To bring up women as educated and skilled human resources.
- To deliver the women from the curse of poverty.
- To remove existing male-female disparities.
- To give appropriate recognition to women's contribution in socio-economic areas.
- To eliminate all forms of abuse of women and female children.
- To eliminate discrimination to women and female children.

- To establish gender equality in politics, administration, other areas of activity, socio-economic activity, education, culture, sports and in all areas of family life.
- To innovate and import technology favoring the interest of women and prohibit anti-women technologies.

Specific to human rights, employment, economic activity and administrative and political empowerment, NWDP includes the following objectives for ending women's inequality:

- To eliminate all forms of discriminations to women in recognition of the fact that man and woman are all equal in all the areas of human rights and fundamental freedom, such as, socio-political, economic and cultural freedoms.
- To ensure gender equal rate of wages, increase participation of women in the labor market, equal opportunity at the workplace, ensured security and removal of disparities in employment.
- To make all our efforts to motivate political parties including the mass media to ensure increased and active political participation of the women.
- To ensure 33 percent representation in phases inside the political parties.
- To raise number of women's seat in the Parliament to 33% and to take initiative to direct election in the extended seats for women.
- To arrange direct poll in the extended seats at all levels of local governments.
- To appoint substantial number of women in the higher levels of decision making.
- To appoint women at increased rate in the administrative, policy making and constitutional posts.
- To increase quota for women at all level and gazetted or non-gazetted positions at entry points aimed at empowerment of women.

### ***National Action Plan***

The government adopted National Action Plan for Women's Advancement (NAP) in 1998. Recognizing women's socio-economic contribution in all spheres and gender discrimination in terms of programs, resources and facilities, NAP has set following goals:

- To make women's development as an integral part of the national development program.

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- To establish women as equal partners in development with equal roles in policy and decision making in the family, community and nation at large.
- To remove legal, economic, political or cultural barriers that prevent the exercise of equal rights by undertaking policy reforms and strong affirmative action.
- To raise public awareness about women's differential needs, interests and priorities and increase commitment to bring improvements of women's position and condition.

### ***Sixth Five Year Plan***

The Country adopted its Sixth Five Year Plan (SFYP), 2011-2015 to accelerate growth and reduce poverty, which was formulated within the framework of the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021. The SFYP was developed within the framework of the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh, which elaborates the Government's Vision 21 where it mentions, "Gender Equality is assured" (Begum, S.F., 2014: 7). The vision of SFYP declared, "The vision for women's advancement and rights is to create a society where men and women will have equal opportunities and will enjoy all fundamental rights on an equal basis. To achieve this vision, the mission is to ensure women's advancement and rights in activities of all sectors of the economy". During the SFYP, improvement in gender equality and women's empowerment has been evident on many fronts. Various processes have been put in place, laws enacted and policies formulated. Various positive measures have been taken by the Government and other stakeholders to promote women's empowerment and shrinking the gender gap.

### ***Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)/ NSAPR***

Bangladesh had first prepared an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP), titled "A National Strategy for Economic Growth, Poverty Reduction and Social Development" in 2003 and it has been shifted as the first full PRSP document in 2005 entitled "Unlocking the Potential: The National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction" (NSAPR) for FY05-FY07 (Bhattacharya, 2006). The second PRSP entitled "Moving Ahead: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (NSPR-II)" was prepared as a sequel to the first one for achieving accelerated poverty reduction through higher pro-poor growth during FY09-FY11 (Siddique, K.N., 2001: 259). Numerous programs have been included in the NSAPR-II aimed at poverty alleviation of the women and mainstream them into the macro economy in this age of

globalization. Five strategies have been identified in this Strategy Paper that includes social security and humanresourcesdevelopment for the vulnerable groups alongside macro-economic management for poor friendly economic growth. In the five strategies the most emphasis has been participatory empowerment in development activity. The special program for alleviation of the poverty of women in the strategy paper provides for ensuring empowering the poorest of the poor or dead poor women by expanding their safety net( National Women Development Policy 2011).

There are some other public policies which have given special emphasis on gender sensitivity. *National Education Policy, 2010* has strongly emphasized the need for access to education and assured the principle of equal access to education for all irrespective of religion, caste and creed, sex, economic status and geographical variation. One of the objectives of *National Agriculture Policy, 1999* is to increase the participation of women in agriculture. *National Industry Policy, 2005* aimed to provide assistance to women entrepreneurs on a priority basis. According to section 1(c) of *National Cooperative Policy, 2001*, ‘encourage cooperative organizations to empower women and to create employment opportunities for women.’ *National ICT Policy 2008* has given priority to minimize digital gap between men and women.

### ***Institutional Mechanisms***

Institutional structure for women’s empowerment and gender equality had been in place since late nineties. Ministry of Women and Children Affairs ( MOWCA) as the nodal ministry operates through its three agencies, Department of Women Affairs, JatiyaMohilaShagsthaand Bangladesh Shishu Academy. The National Council for Women’s and Children’s Development (NCWCD), several committees and WID focal Point mechanism had been in place for guiding and monitoring women’s advancement. NCWCD has been reconstituted in 2009, as the highest forum for monitoring and ensuring gender equality, non-discrimination and empowerment of women chaired by the Prime Minister, other ministers, members of Parliament, secretaries, representatives of the women organizations (Chaudhury, S.S., 2011). WID Focal Point mechanism comprises of representatives from 47 ministries and Associate and sub-WID Focal Points to report on WID activities of their respective ministries on a quarterly basis to MOWCA(Chaudhury, S.S., 2011).

## **Commitments of Bangladesh to International Instruments**

The Government of Bangladesh ratified the CEDAW on November 6, 1984. Bangladesh signed and ratified the optional protocol to the CEDAW convention on September 6, 2000, which was entered into force on December 22, 2000 (Afroz, 2013). Bangladesh has passed about thirty years of the ratification of CEDAW. We know that Bangladesh has submitted total seven National CEDAW reports to the CEDAW Committee. The combined 6th and 7th periodic report has been submitted by Bangladesh in January 25, 2011 (NWDP, 2011). At the time of ratification, the government of Bangladesh made reservations to three vital provisions of CEDAW (Khan Salma, 2006). These are: Article 2: Policy measures, Article 13 (a): equality as to the right to family benefits, Article 16 (1) (c): equal rights and responsibilities during marriage and its dissolution, Article 16 (1) (f): equal rights and responsibilities regarding to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship and adoption of children etc. On the 23 July, 1997 during the submission of 3rd and 4th periodic reports of Bangladesh has withdrawn reservations to Article 13 (a) and Article 16 (1) (f) of the convention (Afroz, 2013). Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) is a unique document of commitment for empowering women in every sphere of life. BPFA has addressed twelve crucial issues which are directly linked to women empowerment process. All the state parties have united on the 12 issues (UN Publication, 1995). Bangladesh adopted it without any reservation and took initiatives for preparing a follow-up action plan for its implementation. Bangladesh is committed to Achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and one of the prime goals is to empower and mainstream women. Bangladesh faces enormous challenges to meet the MDGs by 2015. Some other relevant international instruments, e.g., ILO Underground Work (Women) Convention, 1935; ILO Night Work (Women) Convention, 1948; ILO Discrimination Convention, 1958; ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951; SAARC Convention etc. are ratified by Bangladesh.

## **Impact of Policy Measures on Gender Equality and Women's Participation Issues**

Assessment of women's concerns in all policy initiatives clearly indicates that over the last few decades, successive governments has increasingly made efforts to incorporate women's issues into respective policy documents. Women's increased visibility in public sphere is prompted by the rise of different policy efforts in Bangladesh. Now there are many positive and visible examples of women's success in different sectors and professions. In the 10th Parliamentary Election which has been held on

5th January, 2014, 19 women are directly elected (Bangladesh Parliament, 2014). The provision for 50 reserved seats for women has been implemented. At present the Leader, the Deputy Leader and the leader of the Opposition are female. Out of 50 Parliamentary Standing Committees; women are heads of 8 committees and in 76 member positions ([www.parliament.gov.bd/](http://www.parliament.gov.bd/)). Now four (4) women including the Prime Minister have been appointed to a 49-member Cabinet. Among them two are full ministers and two are state ministers (Cabinet Division). For the first time, a woman has been elected as Mayor in the City Corporation Election of 2011. At present, there are three reserved seats for women in every Union Parishad, where they are directly elected from each of the three wards (GOPRB, Local government Act-1997, Revised in 2009). Now a woman is directly elected as Vice-Chairman in every Upazilla Parishad (Upazilla Parishad Act-2011). Now 10% quota for gazetted post, 15% quota for non gazetted post and 60% quota for primary school teachers' post, 30% quota for secondary school teachers' post are reserved for women in Bangladesh (NWDP, 2011). In March 2, 2014 Bangladesh got its first female public university Vice-Chancellor (VC) (The Daily Star, 2014). The above examples of women's participation do not indicate gender equality in public life. However, all the policy initiatives for gender equality and women's advancement in Bangladesh remain less advanced, both at the formulation and operational level. Although the constitution of Bangladesh provides equal right for women to participate in all spheres of life, they remain considerably under-represented at both local and national levels of politics and public forum. All policy efforts, e.g., National Women Development Policy (2011), National Action Plan (1998), Sixth Five Year Plan, PRSP/ NSAPR have outlined main aims to ensure equality of women with men in every sphere of life, they differ in reality. These policy efforts have failed to ensure equal participation of women in all decision making bodies. Involvement of women in the parliamentary committees has been partially achieved but their involvement in local political institutions still remains very low. Women's representation in decision making forums in political parties remains low with numbers in central working committees varying between 2.7 percent to 11.2 percent (Aparajita Alliance (2014). Participation of women in different levels of the administration is overall 15 percent. The percentage of women at the rank of Secretary and Additional Secretary was 1.89% and 1.14% respectively. The percentage of women as Joint Secretary constituted 7.96%, Deputy Secretary 13.20%, Senior Assistant Secretary 19.29% and Assistant Secretary 29.20% (Gender Statistics of

Bangladesh, 2012). There are only three (3) women ambassadors in Bangladesh. In the Supreme Court Appellate Division, number of women judge is only one out of nine; in High Court there are only four women out of 90 judges (Aparajita Alliance (2014)). On the other hand the participation of women in Dewani (Civil) Court by Division, the highest percentage of women was found in Dhaka Division (12.7%) followed by Chittagong and Khulna Division (9.9%) and Barisal Division (7.8%). The percentage of women in Dewani (Civil) Court was the lowest in Sylhet Division (5.3%) (Gender Statistics of Bangladesh, 2012).

### **limitations on the way of formulating and implementing policy efforts**

Review of the available studies, content review of relevant documents some limitations have been identified that hamper the whole formulation and implementation process of different policy initiative related to gender equality and women's participation issues. These are as follows:

- Major policy efforts suffer from various institutional limitations such as lack of human resources, budgetary constraints, lack of sector specific experts, inadequate mechanisms for capacity development, weak documentation and information dissemination system, poor data management system, inadequate and poor infrastructure and logistic support systems.
- There is no proper reporting system through which the actual status of women in such policies could be traced.
- There is no effective policy tracking mechanism, i.e. there is no system of making a follow up of the pronounced policy.
- There is a lack of coordination between different agencies responsible for implementation of the policy agenda and the WID focal points are not yet active.
- There is a gap in understanding and internalizing PRSP as a policy document by the relevant ministries.
- Policy implementation and formulation processes are totally centralized, bureaucratic, and clumsy.
- The implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes of all policy initiatives mostly focused on financial and physical progress and the monitoring formats did not integrate gender related result monitoring criteria. The Committees established by MOWCA for monitoring of gender equality and women's advancement were irregular and not effective.

- It has been found that many of the policies undertaken by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the other sectoral ministries have similar objectives and goals. This leads to duplication of efforts using scarce resources as well as undermines comparative technical capacity and advantage.
- An accountability mechanism to implement the NAP, National Women Development Policy (NWDP) and other policies could not be established.
- The influence of prevalent discriminatory and patriarchal social norms and values on women's participation in decision-making and policy implementation is significant. The role of different conservative groups was not supportive while the NWDP 2011 was formulated and approved. Some groups demonstrated against the provisions related to women's acquisition of assets under the policy.

### **Recommendations**

- Some laws and policies are yet to incorporate provisions to ensure women's participation and equal rights and these need review and revision. MOWCA's capacity should be improved to provide technical support to line ministries in reviewing such policies and laws.
- The enforcement of the policy provisions should be ensured through establishing effective mechanisms and accountability. Some good practice examples are available in other countries, which include, independent Commission on Women, Oversight of Human Rights Commission and Audit Commissions, which may be considered for adaptation.
- The existing institutional mechanism for women's advancement needs to be made effective with accountability, capacity and authority. Regular guidance from MOWCA, NCWCD, functioning of the committees and the WID Focal Point mechanism should be ensured. Other institutions should also be assigned specific roles in promoting gender equality.
- Mainstreaming of gender should continue to be an approach and all macro-economic and sectoral policies should integrate gender as a crosscutting theme. Gender analysis should be used to plan and assess every sector's contribution to improving the lives of women, men, girls and boys of all age. Action plans should be drawn with a view to reduce inequality and promote an equal relationship between sexes.

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- Each of the Ministries also needs to develop specialized planning and analytical skills to design gender sensitive programs and projects.
- An effective and strong linkage and coordination between the ministries and other government and non-government agencies must be established.
- As a crosscutting issue, women's advancement and rights issues have to be addressed horizontally in the context of policies and strategies of all sectors and thematic areas.
- An analytical link between NSAPR and the ministry budget must be established and strengthened.
- Considering all discriminatory policies and laws, there is an urgent need to enact a Uniform Family Code (UFC), which will apply to all the nation's citizens irrespective of their religion. This will be in conformity with the Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Bangladesh is a signatory.

## Conclusion

Gender inequality has been identified as barrier to economic growth, poverty reduction and family wellbeing. It is important to address structural barriers to gender equality on one hand and facilitate women's advancement in different areas on the other. These two approaches require concerted and multipronged action across sectors, at the public, institutional and household levels. The Constitution of Bangladesh promises a number of rights to women, including equality of opportunity and policies for affirmative action. However, the constitutional pledges have not been maintained, due to lack of proper legal and procedural framework as well as the absence of legal awareness in wider society. Although the Bangladesh government has adopted a number of policies, laws, plans and programs on gender equality and women's participation issues, all will remain as simple policy document if the propositions are not translated into implementation programs and adequate legislative measures are not taken. At present the vision of Bangladesh should be to ensure women's advancement as self-reliant human beings and reduce discriminatory barriers by taking and implementing appropriate policy measures. Policy Framework on gender equality and women's advancement should be designed within a well thought out framework that encompasses all the dimensions, e.g., economic, social, political. Appropriate policy efforts that not only enhance women's capabilities and access to resources and opportunities but also address the barriers in structures and institutions and aim at changing social norms and protecting their rights in every sphere of life.

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