Women and Politics in Bangladesh: A Study on Female Students

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Abstract

What is the state of women participation in politics? Why women lag behind man in terms of participation? Is it only nature of the polity or the women themselves? How far the females are interested or aware about politics? What is their nature of political socialization and participation? Broaching these questions, the article argues that nature of socialization and host of socio-political factors are responsible for existing degree and nature of women's political participation. Nevertheless, the moderate level of political interest of female themselves is also a hitch in increasing their political participation.

Introduction

A truly democratic and representative government cannot be established without women's participation in the political processes. In democracy, women should enjoy equal rights of political participation and exercise their rights fully. Historically, men have dominated the world of government and politics everywhere. Women are less represented in national legislatures, vote less, and do not scrutinize policies enacted that address their needs and circumstances. This limitation is more or less universal in all societies' developed or otherwise, bourgeois, democratic or socialist, and the emerging newly independent post-colonial societies in the Asian and African continents. In October 2000, the UN adopted a resolution to increase women's representation at all levels of decision making institutions. But the percentage of women legislators worldwide has not increased much since then. Even these days one witnesses the continuing low percentage of women politicians internationally. Although most world constitutions now guarantee equal political rights to

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women at least in theory, if not in practice. The situation of Bangladesh is not at all different (Ahmed, 2005). The constitution of Bangladesh provides equal rights to women as men in all sphere of life. But political awareness, consciousness and participation have not developed among women both at national and local level due to socio cultural situation of the country (Akter, 2005:49). Bangladesh is governed largely by patriarchy, traditional values, customs and superstitions. Women generally get less opportunity in every sphere of life vis-à-vis men in country (Mizanuddin, 2005: 147). Women have been depicted as politically ineffective, unmotivated, naïve, invisible and dependent upon the wisdom of men. Therefore to understand how far women in Bangladesh are interested and aware about politics and what factors have obstructed their participation and socialization like men were the main purpose of the research.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to understand the nature and extent of political awareness and participation of the female student in public universities. As awareness and participation of female student to a considerable degree depends on their political socialization as well as their own interest, we tried to understand their nature of political socialization. In still another respect we hope to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between political participation and socialization. Therefore the research is based on the following objectives:

1. To understand the degree of political awareness of female students.
2. The nature of their political socialization as well as political orientation.
3. and the extent of their political participation

Rationale of the study

The study on the nature and extent of political awareness and participation of the female students in the public universities has been carried out mainly for three reasons. First, women comprise about half of the population and a substantial part of women is student. The rationale for initiating this study is to understand political awareness of that section of female student who get the opportunity of higher studies in an environment where they have more access to participate in different political activities as well as develop their political viewpoints and ideology in a broader socio-political context. Second, the study is

expected to contribute to an understanding of the reasons behind lower participation of women than men. Third, recent literature on the subject is limited. A number of studies have been conducted on political participation of women in Bangladesh, but perhaps none have addressed the nature and extent of political awareness and participation of the female students in the public universities.

Methodology

To conduct the study we used survey method. This study was conducted on the basis of primary as well as secondary data. Primary data was collected from the Dhaka and Rajshahi University. One female student from each year of different departments of social science faculty of these two universities was chosen. Respondents were selected on the basis of random sampling. Structured questionnaire was used for data collection. the study also use extensive information and data from secondary sources that includes different books, research report, journals, thesis, relevant publications, reports of the NGOs, news letter and daily news papers. Quantitative data was analyzed by using simple statistical methods. Some data was analyzed qualitatively.

Conceptual Framework

The study seeks to explore the nature and extent of political awareness and participation of female students in public universities, therefore it is necessary to discuss and understand the concepts i.e. awareness, participation and socialization. To develop a conceptual framework these concepts have been discussed.

Political Awareness

Awareness is an important concept in the discussion of politics. It is also an important factor that influences nature and degree of participation. In Oxford dictionary, awareness means having knowledge and realization of something, or interested in and knowing about something. Marian-Webster online dictionary explains that, awareness implies vigilance in observing or alertness in drawing inference from experiences. It is a state of mind, a tendency to know and change things or a condition of being aware (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/awareness).Awareness may be political, social, economical, spiritual, ecological etc

In this study, awareness would be used to understand political awareness which includes consciousness about political rights and duties such as voting and participate in elections both as a voter as well as a candidate.

Political Participation

Different scholars have expressed variety of opinions regarding political participation. Political participation in its most simple term means "activity by private citizens designed to influence governmental decision-making" (Huntington, 1967: 4). The central theme of participation concerns the activities through which participants try to affect governmental decision making. Efforts are made to influence government decision making by persuading and pressuring the party in power (Abeda, 2002: 121).

Forms of political participation

There is multifarious way through which political participation can take place. People participate in different modes and forms. It encompasses a variety of political activities; some of these activities seem to be very demanding and exert tremendous influence on the political process. However, others require only minimal participation like voting.

Political participation can be categorized simply into two types: conventional and unconventional. However, there are some different characteristic features by which we can explain both conventional and unconventional political participation.

Conventional participation is relatively routine behavior that uses the institutional channels of representative government; these channels include campaigning for candidates, voting in elections and writing letters to public officials. Unconventional participation is relatively eventful and uncommon behavior that exerts vehement pressure on government networks and thus, it is reciprocally stressful to both participants and their opponents. It is stressful because it means doing something that is not usually approved by the dominant culture, going against the established law and order. Unconventional participation includes such activities as protest demonstration, holding sit-down strikes, riots, assassinations, revolutions and the like (Patterson, 2004: 202). In this study political participation will understood in terms of both conventional and unconventional forms of political participation.

Political Socialization

Socialization may be broadly defined as the inculcation of skills and attitudes needed for carrying out social roles. The learning process by which people acquire their political opinions, beliefs, and values is called political socialization. Political beliefs are not ingrained; they are

acquired through a learning process. The socialization process starts in the family and continues through a variety of agents, schools, peers, mass media, and political leaders and events. In fact its Political socialization is a lifelong process (Thomas E. Patterson, 2004: 181-182).

With the concept of political socialization, we can relate adult political attitudes and behavioral propensities to the manifest and latent political socialization experiences of childhood.

In this study political socialization would be understand through analyzing the nature of interaction with agents of socialization regarding politics.

The existing nature of political participation of female students, we assume will be the outcome of two independent variables i.e political socialization and political awareness. If the female students are socialized to that extent where they identify politics as an important determining factor of societal development like economics and others they will be interested in political and governmental issues and activities. Again their degree of awareness and interest will lead them to know about their role and responsibilities in politics which will ultimately led them to participate in different political activities (dependent variable). In this regard broader political cultural context to a great extent influence the nature of socialization and participation as an intervening variable in the model.

Political culture will be understood as the subjective perception of history and politics, the fundamental beliefs and values, the foci of identification and loyalty, and the political knowledge and expectations which are the product of the specific historical experience of nations and groups (Brown, 1979:1).Almond and Verba (1963:14) saw political culture in terms of the "...political system as internalized in the cognition, feelings and evaluations of its population". This study has adopted the definition of political culture advanced by Patterson: the term political culture refers to the characteristics and deep seated beliefs of a particular people about government and politics (Patterson, 2004: 6).

Result and Discussion

During the study following questions were asked to the female students to understand their extent of political awareness and participation. We also include some question to understand their level of interest and nature of political socialization to supplement our research question.

1. Female students' awareness and interest about politics

i. Are you interested in politics?

Yes	No	Partially	Did not answer
21	21	47	3
22.83%	22.83%	51.08%	3.27%

22.83% respondents expressed their interest in politics.22.83% opined that they are not interested about politics. However 51.08% of the respondents had a little bit interest about politics and 3.27% did not answer.

To measure their extent of interest following questions were asked as a supplementary question.

ii. Do you like to read political news in newspaper?

Yes	No	Occasionally
47	5	40
51.08%	5.44%	43.48%

Among the respondents 51.08% read political news, 5.44% do not read any political news, and 43.48% read occasionally.

iii. Do you read/watch political news and analytical program on media?

Regularly	Not at all	Occasionally
21	11	60
22.83%	11.96%	65.22%

Nearly 66% of the total respondents watch political news and analytical program on media occasionally. About 23% watch regularly where as near about 12% never watch.

iv. Do you think it is important to have political knowledge for a woman?

Yes	No	Did not answer
87	5	0
94.57%	5.44%	0%

94.57% of the respondents answered in the affirmative and they pointed out that it is important to have political knowledge for a woman, 5.44% answered in the negative.

v. Which factors are responsible for limited participation of women in politics in?

Lack of education	Lack of political consciousness	Obstacles from family	Did not answer
16	52	22	2
17.40%	56.53%	23.92%	2.18%

The respondents stressed that a number of factors are responsible for, in the context of Bangladesh, limited participation of women in politics. Among the respondents 56.53% believed that lack of consciousness is the cause of limited participation of women in politics. 17.40% mentioned lack of education, 23.92% stated obstacle of family, and 2.18% did not answer.

vi. What are the reasons behind low participation of women in direct election?

Social	Political	Economical	Religious	Did not answer
68	2	4	15	3
73.92%	2.18%	4.35%	16.31%	3.27%

The respondents stressed that there are a number of causes in the context of Bangladesh for low participation of women in direct election. The causes include: social cause (73.92), political cause (2.18%), economic cause (4.35%), religious cause (16.31%). 3.27% did not cite any specific cause.

vii. How much is it fruitful for holding election in reserved female seats?

Highly	Partially	Not at all	Did not answer
6	63	20	3
6.53%	68.48%	21.74%	3.27%

The above table shows the answer of how much is it fruitful for holding election in reserved female seats, only 6.53% of the respondents believes that it is highly fruitful for holding election in reserved female seats while 21.74% think not at all. Most of the respondents (68.48%) admitted that it is comparatively effective, 3.27% did not give any answer to the question.

viii. Do you think this system should be abolished?

Yes	No	Did not answer
39	47	6
42.40%	51.09%	6.53%

6.53% did not answer the question on whether this system should be abolished or not. However 51.09% of the total respondents answered in the negative and 42.40% in the affirmative.

ix. Do you have any interest in the political history of Bangladesh?

Yes	No	Partially
48	16	28
52.18%	17.40%	21.74%

About 53% of the respondents have interest in political history of Bangladesh. However, about 18% of the respondents held completely the opposite views. They don't have any interest at all. Among the respondents 21.74% have political knowledge about political history.

x.Which criteria of the candidates influence you to vote in the election?

Integrity	Wealth	Qualification	Experience	Age	Individual relation	Group candidature	Others	Did not answer
33	8	48	23	10	10	15	8	5
35.05%	8.70%	52.18%	25.00%	10.87%	10.87%	16.31%	8.70%	5.44%

Respondents identified reasons for not participating to vote in the election. These reasons are included: integrity (35.04%), wealth (8.70%), qualification (52.18%), experience (25.00%), age (10.87%), individual relation (10.87%), group candidature (16.31%). 8.70% mentioned others. 5.44% gave no answer.

2. Types of political socialization

i. Are your family members politically active?

Highly active	Partially	Not at all	Did not answer
5	48	38	1
5.44%	52.18%	41.31%	1.09%

Most of the respondents (52.18%) mentioned, to some extent they are active, 5.44% said they are highly active, 41.31% opined that they are not politically active at all and 1.09% did not answer the question.

ii. Is there any culture to discuss political issues in your family?

Yes	No	Occasionally	Did not answer
25	14	53	0
27.18%	15.22%	57.61%	0%

Most of the respondents (57.61%) stated that occasionally political issues are discussed in their family, 15.22% of the total respondents answered in the negative way and 27.18% answered in the affirmative way.

iii. Does the family encourage you to participate in political activities?

Yes	Occasionally	Not at all	Did not answer
9	51	32	0
9.79%	55.44%	34.79%	0%

55.44% told their family partially encourages them, 34.79% said not at all. But very little percentage of the respondents (9.79%) told that their family encourages them to participate very much.

iv. Does your family encourage you watching political news, debates on Television?

Yes	No	Occasionally	Did not answer
37	25	29	1
40.22%	27.18%	31.53%	1.09%

40.22% family encourage watching political news, debates on television, 27.18% family do not encourage and 31.53% occasionally encourage. 1.09% did not give any answer.

v. Do you get any chance to exchange political opinion with your friends and teachers and take part in political discussion with them?

Yes	No	Occasionally	Did not answer
25	25	40	2
27.18%	27.18%	43.48%	2.18%

Same percentages of respondents (27.18%) respond affirmatively and negatively. 43.48% occasionally exchange political opinion with their friends and teachers and take part in political discussion with them. 2.18% did not give any answer.

vi Which factor is responsible for developing your political ideology?

Historical political support of family	self judgment and logic	Activities by politicians	Encouragement by friends or others	Did not answer
14	65	6	2	5
15.22%	70.66%	6.53%	2.18%	5.44%

In answering the question which factor is responsible for developing your political ideology? They mentioned different factors, such as self judgment (70.66%), historical political support of family (15.22%), activities of politicians (6.53%), encouragement by friends or others (2.18%). 5.44% gave no answer.

3. Level of female student's participation in politics

i, Do you support any political party?

Yes	No	Occasionally
20	42	30
21.74%	45.66%	32.61%

Only 20 respondents (21.74%) support a particular political party, majority of the respondents (45.66%) do not support any political party, and a significant number of respondents (32.61%) expressed the opinion that they occasionally support any political party.

ii. Do you have any engagement with political parties at your institution?

Yes	No	Occasionally	Did not answer
6	77	7	2
6.53%	83.70%	7.61%	2.18%

6.53% have engagement with political parties at their institution, 7.61% maintains occasional engagement with political parties. Most of the respondents (83.70%) do not have any attachment with political parties at the institution. 2.18% did not give any answer.

iii. Do you participate in vote and/or any other political activities (campaigning for candidates, political meeting, procession, rally etc.)?

Yes	No	Occasionally
8	78	6
8.70%	84.79%	6.53%

84.79% do not take part in vote and other political activities (political meeting, procession, rally), only 8.70% answered 'yes' and 6.53% occasionally participate in political activities.

iv. Do you write to the editor or public officials?

Yes	No	Occasionally
2	87	3
2.18%	94.57%	3.27%

A majority of respondents (94.57%) never write to editor, only 2.18% write to editor regularly and 3.27% write occasionally.

v. Do you participate in politics in any unconventional way (protest, demonstration, holding sit-down strikes, riots, assassinations, revolution etc.)?

Yes	No	Occasionally
1	87	4
1.09%	94.57%	4.35%

The vast majority of the respondents (94.57%) are not interested to involve themselves in any political activities. Only 1.09% of the respondents agreed that they are involved in political activities. 4.35% of the respondents are occasionally involved in any political activities.

vi. What are the obstacles behind non- participation in political activities?

Lack of interest	Limited time	Current political value	Family	Dislike by the society to the politically conscious and active females	All
14	5	24	2	10	37
15.22%	5.44%	26.09%	2.18%	10.87%	40.22%

A number of obstacles behind non-participation in political activities were mentioned by the respondents: lack of interest (15.22%), limited time (5.44%), current political value (26.09%), family (2.18%), dislike by the society to the politically conscious and active females (10.87%). 40.22% stated more or less all the causes mentioned above are responsible.

Findings

Most of the respondents have average level of interest about politics. Their interest was reflected through different activities such as reading news paper, political discussion with their friends and family members, queries about recent changes in national and international politics, supporting political parties and their involvement in politics. Very insignificant number of respondents did not read political news. Most of the respondents read political news, also discuss with family members and friends but they could not mention the duration of discussion. Occasionally they watch political news and program on media. They are concerned about the political changes in national and international level. Almost cent percent respondents believe that it is important for a woman to have political knowledge.

Attempt has been made in this research to measure their depth of knowledge about politics. For this reason they were asked several questions regarding current and previous politics. Very few percentages of respondents think that election in reserved female seats is too much fruitful. They mentioned that though it is not appropriate system to achieve the goal nevertheless it should not be abolished. It should be continued for a certain period. They also identified the causes for not participation in direct election and they stated that social reason is the main cause for that. Social means socio-cultural reason. Women's participation in politics is very limited in Bangladesh; lack of consciousness is the root cause. More than fifty percent of the respondents have interest in the political history of Bangladesh. Some important issues of political history of Bangladesh are jail assassination, president assassination, military rule, public agitation of 1990 and single party rule (BAKSAL), the respondents have good knowledge about these issues. The respondents who give vote, they select candidate mainly on the basis of qualification though they consider other criteria.

The research reveals the nature of socialization process of the respondents. Most of the respondents are the member of partially politically active family. Very few percentages came from highly politically active family. In the maximum family there is a culture to discuss political issues with their members and encourage watching

political news, debates on TV. There is also the culture to encourage participating in political discussion but occasionally. Occasionally they read; watch political news and analytical program on media. Occasionally they get chance to exchange political opinion with friends and teachers and take part in political discussion with them. The research reveals that respondents logic, interest, opinion, outlook are responsible for developing their political ideology. Maximum respondents belong to 'occasionally' not in 'yes' or 'not'. That means they are socialized by their family, friends, teachers and media to be moderately politically conscious.

Maximum respondents did not support any political party. They did not have any engagement with political parties at institution. The researchers attempted to know their level of participation. Their level of participation was very limited. Very few percentages wrote to editor. Usually they do not participate in vote and other political activities like political meeting, procession, rally etc. No single cause is responsible for not participation in political activities, they identified multiple reasons.

Our cultural attitudes, values and norms have the impact on women's interest and participation in politics. Culture dictates expectations and actions which differ according to gender. Society has mechanisms to ensure that its members act in normative, generally approved ways. Cultural prohibitions are one of the important reasons for women's absence in politics (Ilyas, 1997). In our culture politics is considered men's business in which ladies should not be involved. The social value that politics is exclusive domains of males still works despite having women in the leadership role in the government and opposition parties. As an individual gets socialized into our culture, he begins to understand that males and females are expected to be different in many ways. Socialization experience of girls directly affects their participation. Girls are socialized to be passive, affectionate, supportive, marriage and family oriented, noncompetitive, and dependent. Women receive the message that home and family are of paramount importance and jobs are secondary to home and family obligations. They are socialized to abandon politics if conflict with family needs arise. The socialization experiences of girls reflect the expectation that girls will spend most of their adult lives as mothers, most parents and teachers encourage girls to acquire personality characteristics that are necessary for marriage and child bearing. Thus, socialization experiences of girls do not encourage them for political participation. However, in our educated and cultured family, this pattern of socialization is changing because of the operation of ideology of education and equality within the family. Nevertheless this pattern is prevailing in most of the families of societies.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion shows that social values and the socialization pattern is the main obstacle to female students' participation in politics. This is at the root of female students' apathy towards politics. Almond notes that 'in most countries higher education is strongly related to political participation and skills'. Conway elaborates that in a political culture that emphasizes "freedom, equality and democracy", citizens can involve themselves in politics either for voting in elections or participation even more as an active member of a political party or running for public office. We agree with them. So level of education should be increased and mass media education programs to be adopted to increase knowledge of women. Social awareness program would be very effective in this respect. The active cooperation between men and women is must for ensuring real political participation of women. Collective efforts by government and NGO can accelerate the pace of the process of political awareness and participation of women. It should, however, be mentioned that this study was conducted in DU and RU and the sample size of the respondents was not too large. It is therefore recommended that further research be conducted on this topic with larger and representative samples of women of all 'universities of Bangladesh before making generalization.

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