


# Alternatives

In collaboration with  centre for alternatives

## Preparing the Grounds for Womenolution!

From the Alternatives Desk

This may sound dramatic but it is no less true that the current demand for increased seats for women in the parliament and having them elected directly, if and when implemented, is bound to transform the nature of politics in Bangladesh. This is not only with respect to putting more women in the parliament and reducing relatively the faces of men there but more importantly in putting forward an agenda of **demascularity** (particularly in getting rid of male chauvinism) both inside and outside the parliament. In strategizing and attaining the goal, three things remain pertinent.

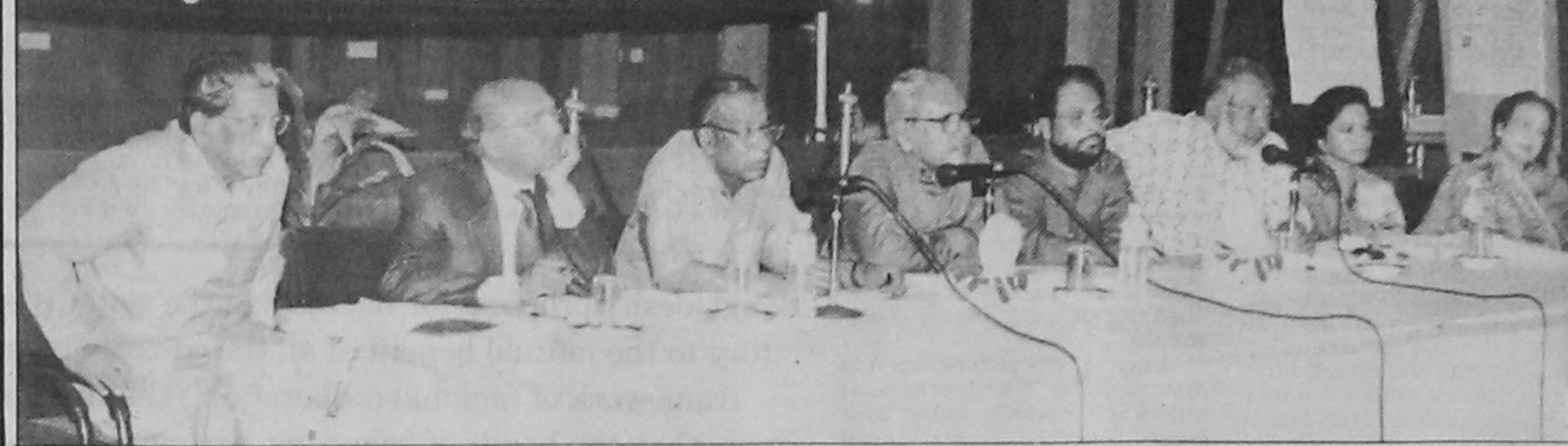
Firstly, there is now a broad consensus amongst civil society activists (both women and men) that the minimum number of women seats acceptable is 64 (one from each district) while the maximum could go up to 100 (that is, one-third in a 300-seat parliament). And whether minimum or maximum, the election to these seats ought to be direct with the participation of both female and male voters. The period for such reservation of women seats could be limited to four general elections or 20 years, when the issue could again be renegotiated. Since the pro-women activists have already put forward a proposal with minimum and maximum numbers, including the provision for direct election, it is now up to the politicians to accept the most feasible and the one that is more politically palatable. Let this be made very clear: **the ball that had been tossed to women for some months on the issue of women representation in the parliament now remains with the politicians!** It is time that they set the ball rolling once again, this time for concrete negotiation and the resolution of the issue.

Secondly, there is a general impression that both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition (currently Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia respectively) became leaders because of family connection, that is, because their father or husband got killed. While there is some merit to this argument, it is also true that both of them rose to prominence through sheer hard work and political ingenuity. Moreover, we never hear about one or two (male) ministers and state ministers that they are in that position because of their fathers! More importantly, few take cognisance of the fact that both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia hold immense power within their respective political parties, in fact, more power than even Bill Clinton or Tony Blair have over their own political parties! And it is this factor of having an empowered or some would say, overpowered woman Prime Minister/Leader of the Opposition that has been least explored and put to use: in fact, pro-women activists have thus far failed to use this power more creatively. There is indeed much to gain not by isolating but by creatively engaging the two all-powerful women in the current set of women's demands.

Finally, nothing in Bangladesh seems to succeed without making a loud noise and taking the demands to the streets. It is difficult to see the (male) politicians agreeing to the above demands without hundreds and thousands of people, mostly women, making a show in the streets. Maybe the time has come for the pro-women activists to prepare themselves for a protracted struggle, a part of which will require their presence in the streets. Indeed, they might as well come with their children, with their favourite books, with their sewing materials, with their laptops, with their cooking utensils, with their music, with their dress and design, and many more, and make a stay in the streets until their demands are met. Indeed, nothing short of **Womenolution** will bring sense to (male) politicians!

## Dialogue on Women in Parliament

venue: LGED Auditorium, Dhaka  
Date: August 10 2000  
Organized by:  
The Daily Star Centre for Alternatives



The panel of speakers at the Dialogue on Women in Parliament, jointly organised by Centre for Alternatives, The Daily Star and FEMA.

## Politics, Women and the Parliament

by Fawzia Tawheed

### Proposals for Women's Representation

Following are the proposals for enhancing Women's representation and effective participation in National Parliament:

#### By Party in Power

Bill submitted by the law Minister - main features:

- > continuation of 30 reserved seats for women
- > method of election-indirect election(nomination)
- > for a period of next 10 years

#### By the Opposition Party - BNP (Mannan Bhuiyan)

- > continuation of 30 reserved seats for women
- > method of election-indirect election(nomination)

#### By others

#### A. Proposal 1 by a section of the women's movements

Main Features	Arguments for	Difficulties
1. Direct Election	Direct Election	Size of the constituency too large
2. Increase reserved seats from 30 to 64	Increase in number	campaigning difficulties
3. Number 64 based on administrative division of the country's 64 Districts	No delimitation of constituencies required	status of women MPs unclear
4.		Overlapping of roles and responsibilities with general MPs
5.		Determination of developing resource allocation distribution for women MPs may cause contention/conflicts

#### B. Proposal 2 by a section of the women's movements: Private Members Bill by Barrister Rabeya Bhuiyan

Main Features	Arguments for	Difficulties
1. One-third reservation in Parliament for women i.e. 100 seats out of the existing 300 general seats	Direct Election	Determination of constituencies an issue
2.	Increase in women seats	Reducing the number of seats available to male MPs
3.	In keeping with	100 seats out of present 300

#### C. Proposal 3 - Proposed draft bill of Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (proposed and presented by Barrister Tania Amir for and on behalf of Bangladesh Mohila Parishad)

Main Features	Arguments for	Difficulties
1. Size of parliament increased to 450 seats	Direct Election	Overlapping of roles and responsibilities with MPs belonging to the general seats
2. 150 seats reserved for women	General seats kept intact	Status of Women MPs not clear
3.	Accommodated within the existing delimitation of constituency	Resource implication for the State
4.	Manageable size of the constituency for women in reserved seats (any two adjoining constituencies to form a constituency for women in the reserved seats)	

### Why Reserved Seats?

The women seat is most precious to political parties today as the recent trend in election have been that no party achieves absolute majority or a big margin. The reserved seats therefore, are the deciding factors as to which party will form the government. The manifestos of the political parties did not explicitly deal with women and their issues or concerns in either of the election periods of 1991 and 1996, but had a small statement on women and development. The election manifestos of major political parties do not indicate any comprehensive programme for ensuring and encouraging women's participation in politics. In both the 1991 and 1996 elections the major political parties gave 'ticket' to only 3 to 4 women candidates.

Political support stemmed from social mobilisation can ensure empowerment of women at all levels in the country. Parliament is the supreme body for framing laws but women representatives cannot play any effective role there because they are not elected by the people. If elected directly, they would be able to play a major role in country's politics which will help empowerment of the womenfolk. This will help stop use of black money in election and of terrorism in the society. Only 7 women MPs are directly elected at present. The others have all been nominated for the specified seats. At a time when women are fighting for their rights and trying to establish equality, the prospect of keeping aside seats for women does seem discriminatory against men. Terrorism and hooliganism still works as major obstacle in the process of unhindered grooming of democracy. Social resistance from all classes of people against terrorists is a key factor which could uproot terrorism from the political arena.

Nor is the environment fully conducive to women's free participation in elections or for them to function properly as elected members. Consider the abominable treatment that some elected Union Parishad members have reportedly been subjected to at the hands of men in their own constituencies. Consider the relentless incidents of rape, repression and oppression of females in general, and the poor and powerless in particular, to appreciate the stand taken by the women's groups. The time has not yet come to cancel the provision for reserved seats in parliament.

### Some Recommendations

As such the women's organisation of Bangladesh are demanding both the increase of reserved seats for women from 30 to 64, one from each district, as well as in the mode of election i.e. from indirect to direct election. In 1997 Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) in collaboration with Study and Research Group (SRG) organised an International Workshop on October 16-17, 1997. After having discussions with women's groups and holding workshops with women's organisations, and made the following recommendations:

1. that provision should be made in the proposed Political Parties Act requiring each Political Party to nominate at least 30% of women candidates in general seats when the reserved seats for women in the Parliament shall cease to exist;
2. that the reservation of seats for women in Parliament continue at least for another two terms;
3. that the number of reserved seats for women should be increased to a reasonable limit, if possible up to 100; and
4. that direct election in the reserved seats be introduced in consultation with the Political Parties (FEMA: 1997)

These proposals were subsequently discussed elaborately and examined by the participants in the workshops and discussion meetings with the representatives of the political parties and professional groups. The following emerged from the discussion:

1. the participants almost unanimously held that the reserved seats in Parliament should be filled in through election;
2. vast majority of the participants held that the number of reserved seats should be increased from 30 to 64 i.e. one seat to each district;
3. the majority endorsed the recommendation that the reserved seats for women should continue for another two terms
4. each political party should nominate at least 25% women out of the total candidates for national elections (FEMA: 2000)

In a seminar on Women and Political Parties organised by FEMA (Fair Election Monitoring Alliance) in April 2000, Dr. Dilara Chowdhury forwarded some recommendations as remedy

from the existing illness, thoughts and practice. According to her there should be increased efforts to close the gap between the statements and the resolutions and actual conditions on the ground. The awareness level of the political parties should be raised through holding of seminars, symposiums and orientation sessions involving MPs, party leaders and party workers both male and female. She emphasised on making efforts to include women in different party positions and to place issues related to women and development in party manifestos. She also underscored the need for making 25% of the party nomination to women mandatory in order to bring women into mainstream parliamentary election. Some other recommendations are given below extracted from a recently organised seminar:

- mass media should be used to create favourable public opinion for enacting pro-women legislation in the national parliament.
- there is also a great need for the formation of women's political organisations, which should aim at achieving representation of women in parliament and political positions.
- we need to ensure women's equal right to politics in order to introduce a healthy and peaceful way of doing politics.
- women's organisations must emerge as a pressure group to have their demands implemented.
- registration of political parties is necessary for bringing about transparency and accountability in their activities.
- formation of a political party specially for and with women. The leaders of women's organisations should contest national elections to broaden their role in politics.

FEMA recommended increase of women's representation in the highest legislative body of the country from 30 to 64, one from each district and demanded change in the mode of election to these seats from indirect to direct

- specific duties for elected women members of Union Parishad to be demarcated.

In a recently organised meeting in The British Council on 17 July 2000 on Women in National Politics following recommendations have been set forth:

- Direct Election
- Fixed nominations by all political parties
- Increase reserved seats for women for an agreed duration
- Float a women's party to contest the next election.

### Conclusion

Women are coming out of their seclusion and participating in the economic and social life. Compared with many countries in Asia and Africa, the potential merit of women empowerment in Bangladesh is not at all bleak. Fourteen hundred 'semi-literate' elected women in Union Parishads have been struggling hard to involve themselves in the mainstream of local governance and development interventions. They could still perform better with systematic judicial and legislative supports from the government. Politics can play a pivotal role to greatly contribute to women empowerment in Bangladesh, but ironically such political moves seem not to be forthcoming automatically. Individual women activists, entrenched woman leadership, militant NGOs spearheaded by women, woman intelligentsia associated with teaching, research and journalism, and such other interests should press hard to make wider rooms for them in formal political process.

Women are capable of working relentlessly. A woman friendly electoral process should be created by taking positive measures to ensure gender balance in the composition of election management bodies and the appointment of senior staff. To increase women's participation each political party should nominate at least a certain number of women participants during elections. At the same time the voters should be made aware of their rights to choose their representatives (MPs) who are paid from public exchequer and who should be accountable to them directly. Thus with impressive, forceful action programs and wise negotiations, women could be successfully brought to the parliament of Bangladesh where they can play a vital role for the interest of social advancement and make them fully accountable to their electorate and promote their self-confidence and pride.

The author is a Research Officer, FEMA.

## Why Women in Politics?

by Farah Kabir

WOMEN across Bangladesh are beginning to ask questions about democracy and political participation. The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementary drawing mutual enrichment from their differences (Universal Declaration on Democracy, updated by the Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Cairo 1997). Participation of women is, therefore, a pre-requisite for democracy and its sustainability. Women's participation in public affairs is central to the functioning and strengthening of democracy. A democracy that excludes women, or in which women are marginally represented, is not a real democracy. Today globally it is gaining support that woman's participation in policy making is a question of justice and equality. Democracy has to be redefined to be more participatory and inclusive.

Initially politics was defined by men, and had for a long-time no principles of equal rights and participation. The mere participation of women in the political life of a country is an important step in democratic life. It offers equal opportunity practically and not only theoretically. Our experience at the Union Parishad confirms that once the women have been given the scope to become actors in the structure it enables them to be assertive and demand accountability. In a Union Parishad in Barguna a woman UP member successfully exposed the corruption and malpractices of the chairman, who at present is in custody.

When politics is defined and led by the women as much as by men it will guarantee freedom as well as a source of diversity and richness in all areas of life. Men and women's vision is different and the method of developing political action may also differ. It is important that, there should be room in politics for both views and diversity, and not necessarily they will be contradictory but may be mutually enriching. Democracy is improved by the efforts of both sexes.

Women have been the driving forces behind policies and draft legislation of benefits to women. In 1973 Parliament it was a woman MP who raised the issue of dowry and which later in 1980 was translated into the Dowry Prohibition Law. Within legislation there have been a lot of changes to eliminate discrimination, the National Policy for Women and Development, Dowry Prohibition Law, 1980, and Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, and the recent Gazette notification of the Government to incorporate mother's identity in forms are just a few examples of women's contribution to change and actions to benefit women. Farida Rehman of BNP placed as Private members Bill a bill to address the issue of polygamy and Barrister Rabeya Bhuiyan of Jatiya Party on reservation of one-third positions for women including 100 seats reserved for women in Parliament. Both these bills could not see the light of day as leading members of the respective parties did not support the bills. Major initiatives for legal reform or legislation in the interest of women have been initiated either by the women legislators within parliament or

have been a result of women's demand outside.

### Affirmative Measures: Constitutional Provisions and Legislation

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides for formal equality of men and women. Women are entitled to the same fundamental rights as men. Article 10 of the Constitution ensures the participation of women in all spheres of national life; Article 28(2) declares that women shall have rights equal to men in all spheres of the state and public life; Article 65 (3) provides for reserved seats for women in the Parliament, or Jatiya Sangsad and Article 9 promotes the special representation of women in local government.

The Bangladesh government since independence has enacted two laws viz. The Dowry Prohibition Law, 1980, and Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, initially in 1995 and amended in 2000, aimed at protecting women and children from violence that may cause physical or mental harm to them or even threat to their lives.

The provision of reserved seats was introduced to 'safeguard' a minimum representation of women in view of their disadvantaged position in society. Women were provided with 'protected' representation because they were not considered in a position to compete successfully with male politicians for territorial constituencies. Presently there are 30 women in the parliament from the

reserved seats. In 1987 on completion of 15 years this provision lapsed as a result there was no reserved seat in the Fourth Parliament of 1987.

In 1990 the 10th Amendment to the Constitution re-inserted clause (3) to article 65 providing for 30 reserved seats for a further period of 10 years from the first sitting of the next Parliament. Several ideas were floated during this time - for example, abolishing the indirect election of women representatives and filling the reserved seats by direct election from territorial constituencies, and establishing quotas for women nominated by the party to run for general seats. None were adopted and the old provision was introduced for a further 10 years. This provision will lapse in 2001 and till date there has been no sincere efforts either by the government in power to bring a bill in parliament enhancing women's political participation and effective participation.

The women seats are most precious to political parties today as the recent trend in elections have been that no party achieves absolute majority or a big margin. The reserved seats can therefore, be the deciding factor as to which party will form the government. We therefore notice no shift in the position of political parties regarding the women reserved seats in Parliament. Despite lobbying and advocacy for ten years by the women's movement political parties have not amended the system.

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