

Women in Parliament

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

Women in Parliament: A Report

by Sohela Nazneen

“WERE the honourable MPs present here informed about by the organisers?” Lakshmi Chatterji of Manikganj asked this question after the panel of MPs consisting of both the ruling and opposition parties failed to present their respective party positions on the issue of representation of women in the parliament. The question probably sums up the guilt that exists between the expectations of women and civil society members and the views held by the political parties on this issue.

Recently the question of representation of women in the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) has come into the forefront, as the tenure for the 30 reserve seats will end in April 2001. None of the major political parties have taken any innovative steps to change the current scenario despite the strong demands for such steps made through lobbying and demonstrations by the women and human rights activists and organisations. Moreover, the absence of the opposition at the JS means that there is a possibility once the present tenure for 30 reserve seats ends, the women might not have any representation in the JS.

Against the backdrop of this crisis, a public dialogue on *Women in Parliament* was organised by the Centre for Alternatives. The Daily Star and FEMA on August 10, 2000 at the LGED auditorium. The participants were of various backgrounds: teachers, UP members, NGO workers, women and human rights activists and others. They came from the following areas: Dhaka, Khulna, Pabna, Chapai Nawabganj, Natore, Kushtia, Jamalpur, Sylhet, Chittagong, Noakhali, Rangpur, Mymensingh. The dialogue was divided into two sessions. In the first half, the participants articulated their views, demands on representation of women in the JS and identified strategies for meeting these demands and overcoming obstacles. In the second half of the dialogue, a panel of MPs presented their personal and official position of the parties regarding this issue and responded to the questions and suggestions made by the participants.

Seeing Representation through Woman's Eyes

In the first session Munira Khan, Vice-chairperson of FEMA, welcomed all and reminded the participants that without a unified platform and political consensus on women's representation in the JS, the political empowerment of women will not take place. The keynote paper was presented by Imtiaz Ahmed of Centre for Alternatives, which set the tone of discussion for this session. He presented the results of a survey carried out on the Dhakaites, which revealed that 90 per cent of the respondents wanted direct election in the reserved (women) seats of the parliament. These respondents also felt that the number of reserve seats for women should be increased. As for the question on how many seats should be reserved, the views of the respondents varied. Imtiaz Ahmed discussed the merits and disadvantages of each of these options and then the floor was opened for discussion.

The participants quickly expressed unanimity on the following three points and presented the rationale and arguments for making these demands:

- Discontinuing the present system
- Direct election in seats reserved for women
- Increasing the number of seats reserved for women.

Why the Present System Should Go

a. Mere Ornaments: The arguments put forward by the women on why the present system of indirect election in the reserve seats should be abolished are old, but time has not diminished the anger and anguish felt by the women who have been working on this for a long time. Shefali Bhaumik from Jamalpur stated the reason for not wanting the present system succinctly—“The women MPs are mere tokens without any real power.” Shikha Acharya from Naogaon added, “All our MP (woman) does is cut ribbons though she is a very capable woman (if she was allowed to do anything).” The problem, Nasima Akhtar of Chapai Nawabganj, felt was that since the people do not directly elect the women MPs in the reserved seats, the MPs were not accountable to the people.

The participants were quick to point out the political underpinning of the present system. Hajera Sultana, a member of Bangladesh Workers Party, pointed out that the 30 reserved seats for women were bonus points for the majority party that fostered yes' members who were accountable to the party members as they were elected by the MPs. Political empowerment of women or accountability to the people were relegated to the backseat under the present system of indirect election.

b. Why Direct Election: The participants stressed that only direct election in the reserved seats would render political viability to women. Parul Rani, a UP member from Khulna argued that “only en can women claim that people voted for them too, and they qualified and passed.” That women were not in the JS because they were pitied. Only by being elected directly can women claim real power.” The participants also pointed out that taking part in direct election would enhance political experience of women and thus help them to become more effective and active in mainstream politics.

c. More Visibility: All of those present, felt that the number of seats reserved for women should be increased. Shirin Nahar from Patuakhali pointed out that when the provision for the 30 reserved seats for women was enacted the total population of Bangladesh was seven crores. She argued that now the population of Bangladesh has increased to 13 crores; so the number of seats reserved for women should also increase (also the total number of seats in the JS). Malka Banu from Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (BMP) stressed that to increase visibility of women in the JS the number of reserved seats for women should be increased. The participants argued that without women being present in the JS in a critical number, the societal view that politics, the JS are androcentric places will not change.

How Many is Enough?

The crux of the debate was deciding how many seats should be reserved for women. The participants came up with a range of options. Some of them were viable or practical, whereas others were more idealistic. However, all of these options were passionately debated upon and the merits and disadvantages of each of them are given below:

Option	Merits	Disadvantages
Reserved Seats = 64 General Seats = 300 Total Seats = 364	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One woman reserved seat per district • Less radical • Easier for Election Commission to demarcate constituencies for women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Districts are not election constituencies • One woman MP will represent on the average 4.6 general constituencies, which is very large for one person to effectively represent • This will not radically change the androcentric structure of the JS.
Reserve Seats = 75 General Seats = 225 Total Seats=300 (put forward by Bilkis Aziz, Chandpur)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One fourth of the JS seats would be reserved for women • Time limit for the constituencies reserved for women • Will not put financial strain on resources as the total seat number in the JS will not increase. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The incumbent MPs may not want to give up their constituencies to be reserved for women.
Reserved Seats = 100 General Seats = 200 Total Seats = 300 (put forward by Rabeya Bhuiyan MP, JP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30% seats are reserved for women (fulfills the requirement of CEDAW) • Time limit for each constituency reserved for women would be ten years • One woman MP will represent two general constituencies which is feasible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too radical proposition as it would alter the current androcentric structure of the JS. • The incumbent male MPs may not want their constituencies to be reserved for women • The Election Commission might have some difficulties in demarcating constituencies for women.
Reserved Seats= 150 General Seats=300 Total Seats=450	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 per cent women representation in the JS • Does not change the androcentric structure of the JS too drastically • One woman MP will represent two general constituencies, which is feasible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased financial burden as the number of seats in the JS increases. • Demarcation might still pose to be problematic for the Election Commission.
Reserved Seats=150 General Seats=150 Total Seats=300	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal representation (women are 50 per cent of the population) • One woman MP will represent One constituency • Will radically change the androcentric structure of the JS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too radical for the political parties • Male incumbents will not want their constituencies to be reserved for women.
Reserved Seats for Women = 300 Seats for Men=300 Total Seats=600 (idea by Jimatul Ferdous from Madaripur)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% representation • Each party will nominate one woman and one male candidate from every constituency. (a constituency will be a multiple member constituency). • The Election Commission will not have to demarcate the present constituencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too radical • Some voiced concern that this will create a diarchy. • This option will introduce a new <i>purdah</i> system in the JS. Women would only contest against women, and men will contest against men (as there would be no general seats).

The participants also pointed out that all of these options presented above have problems in the following areas:

- 1. Ensuring nomination of qualified women candidates by the political parties.
- 2. Low literacy rate of women.

3. Financial cost of election campaign that needs to be borne by women candidates given the fact that many women do not own property or have access to funds. (According to many of the proposals put forward by the participants, the women candidates would cover a larger election constituency than men)

4. In cases where the number of seats in the JS would be increased, it might not be physically feasible to seat all the MPs during a session in the present parliament building.

5. As suggested in many of these proposals, the demarcated women constituencies would be larger, which would mean women candidates would have to work harder than their male colleagues to work for their constituencies or during election campaign. However, the remuneration would be the same for male and female MPs.

How to Bell the Cat?

The participants came up with the following suggestions and strategies that would help to further their agenda for politically empowering women.

a. Mandatory Nomination by the Political Parties and Monitoring by the EC:

Many of the participants felt that the best way of ensuring visibility and active political participation and empowerment of women is to ensure that it is mandatory for all political parties to nominate a certain percent of women candidates. Hameeda Hosain from ASK argued that Bangladesh could follow the example of Tanzania and a few other countries where this is practiced. She stressed that this provision should be made mandatory constitutionally. She also said that if such provision was in place more women would come into mainstream politics and the nature of politics would change and women would gain political viability. However, Hajera Sultana felt that the Election Commission should monitor whether political parties are transparent in nominating qualified women candidates and filling their quota for women candidates. She argued that when it comes to nominating and campaigning for women (aside from the top level leaders) the political parties are extremely reluctant and uncooperative.

Rozai Ahmed from Natore suggested that the political parties should submit reports on the procedure they followed in selecting party candidates to the Election Commission. She also felt that the general member, especially the women's wing members, should have more voice in nominating election candidates.

b. Amending Article 65.2 of the Constitution:

Rozy Ahmed, Shirin Nahar and many others demanded that steps should be taken to amend Articles 65.2 and 65.3 of the Constitution (Articles 65.2 and 65.3 deals with the structure of the present JS). Unless these are amended, many of the proposals put forward by the women cannot be implemented.

c. Alternative Routes for Nominating Women:

Some of the participants expressed their distrust in political parties nominating women with a view to empower women. They felt that political parties would “half heartedly do the job.” Moreover, they stressed that women who would be nominated by the parties will become mere puppets and will not play any effective role. Shamim Ara from Jamalpur and Parul Rani from Khulna argued that, “independent candidates are better as they do not have to kowtow.” They suggested that local women's groups should create a loose network to nominate women candidates and campaign to elect them.

d. Seating All the MPs:

It was pointed out that not all MPs were present at the JS during a session so in most of the days the MPs would be able to sit given the present arrangements. The participants felt that during the sessions where all MPs are required to be present, many of them could stand (and there is enough standing space) as the Members of the House of Commons do in UK.

e. Financial Viability:

One of the major demands of the participants was ensuring women's entitlement to property and abolishment of discriminatory inheritance laws. Mumtaz Rumi from Kushtia, Maleka Begum, the former General Secretary of BMP and many others stressed that this is a crucial matter that needs to be resolved so that women may have access to assets in order to participate in active politics.

f. Setting Time Limits and Learning from the Experience at the Local Level:

All of the participants felt that the tenure of reserve seats should be for the next 15 to 20 years. Many also stressed that by learning from the problems the women UP members who were directly elected in reserved seats faced, the women MPs would be better prepared in handling the problems they might encounter in dealing with their male colleagues.

Many also suggested that funds for women candidates could come from the state or the respective parties. Some participants pointed out that if the financial expenditure limit set by the EC were strictly followed, the women candidate would be able to campaign effectively. Moreover, few of them even argued that the government could create funds by reducing ‘befazul’ costs (i.e. ask MPs to pay tax for their Pajero Jeeps) and increasing its revenues (i.e. ask MPs to pay their overdue phone bills).

f. Raising Awareness and Changing the Mindset of the Society:

Saleem Samad stressed that extensive voter's education was needed if women's political empowerment issue was to be brought to the forefront. Iqbal Kabir of ADAB suggested that workshops, seminars and awareness raising programs should be organized at the grassroots level in order to mobilize public opinion. The participants pointed out that this should not be treated as a ‘Dhaka-centric’ issue. They felt that women and human rights organizations and other civil society organizations should create a loose network so that the policy makers could be pressurized at all levels. Many of them stressed that the focus of awareness raising programs should be that representation of women in the JS is not a women's issue but a national issue, otherwise the JS is not a women's issue but a national issue, otherwise the JS is not a women's issue but a national issue.

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The Broken Record Played Softly

In the second session the participants discussed with a panel of MPs the various strategies and proposals put forward by them in the first half. The MPs were asked to state their party positions regarding women representation in the JS. All of the MPs present also stated their personal views. After the presentation by the MPs the floor was opened for discussion.

The MPs present were: Tofail Ahmed (AL), M.S. Akbar(AL), G.M. Quader (JP), Rabeya Bhuiyan (JP), M.K. Anwar (BNP), Khurshid Jahan (BNP).

The views and opinions presented by the MALE MPs are given in the table below:

Party	Personal Opinion	Party Position
JP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No reserve seats • Women should come through direct election • Parties should nominate a certain percent of women candidates, which would be either mandatory constitutionally or political consensus should exist upon the number of women candidates that all parties would nominate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political consensus should be created so that a certain number of women candidates would be nominated by the parties
BNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reserve seats should stay for a certain tenure and the number should be increased. • Political consensus needed if women are to be directly elected in reserve seats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No official party position
AL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reserve seats for a certain tenure and the number should be increased. • Direct election of women in reserved seat is only possible if all the problems that arise in demarcating constituencies are solved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The present system would continue. A bill has been placed in the JS (according to Tofail Ahmed, MP)

Why Change is Not Welcome

The male MPs stated the following reasons and arguments for the position they had taken personally and politically.

M.N. Akbar objected that no constituency may be permanently reserved for women, it has to rotate. He pointed out that a fair mechanism for rotation has not so far been presented by the women organizations or the EC.

The MPs also argued that any present incumbent male MP would not want his constituency, which he has nurtured for long time, to be demarcated as reserved for women. This would be unfair to the incumbent MP.

M.N. Akbar also raised the point that election constituencies,

both male and female constituencies should be equal in size. Otherwise the EC would have difficulties in demarcating constituencies and conducting direct elections. He pointed out that according to most of the proposals placed by the women the size of women constituencies were larger than the general constituencies.

The MPs did not think that turning a single member election constituency into a multiple member constituency and nominating one male and one female candidate is viable as it creates diarchy and would cause problems in power sharing. Tofail Ahmed argued that since the culture of personality cult is very strong at the local level, this was not a viable option.

The MPs pointed out that no political consensus existed on direct election of women in reserve seats or for nominating a certain percent of women candidates at the national level. They stressed that it would take a long time before a consensus was reached on this issue.

Tofail Ahmed also argued that the political parties have the freedom to nominate who ever they see fit for winning the election. He felt that parties should not be compelled to nominate a certain percent of women candidates.

The MPs stressed that the rationale behind a party nomination is who would win the election. In the current socio-political context, there is a risk that women candidates might lose if they contested in direct elections and may not have any representation in the JS if the provision of indirect election in reserved seats was abolished.

Moreover, they felt that women should not ask for direct election in reserved seats and an increase in the number of reserved seats for women (as it is like having ones cake and eating it too).

Tofail Ahmed argued that women are demeaning themselves by demanding direct election in reserved seats as many of them are qualified enough to contest and win elections in general seats but were only limiting them to reserved seats.

The MPs also pointed out that women's problems were represented by the male MPs, so the rationale that only women would be able to represent women's issues properly does not hold water.

Bitter Truths

The comments and observations made by the MPs drew sharp, passionate and witty answers from the participants. They raised the following issues/questions:

a. No Transition is Smooth: Rokeya Kabir of Nari Progati reminded the MPs that the objective of women's representation in the JS is for expediting the political empowerment of women. Problems should be expected to arise when demarcating constituencies for women, or nominating a certain percent of women candidates. The parties should deal with these innovatively instead of dillydallying over technicalities. She pointed out that no transition is smooth, and the political parties should be able to take bold measures.

b. Late Excuses: The participants felt that the MPs were using ‘practical considerations’ (i.e. winning elections, demarcation) as excuses for not pushing the issue of women's representation in the