

Women in politics: What should be the focus?



Let's move from the symbolic to the tangible.

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BAKGLADESH is historically and traditionally a highly patriarchal society. All the processes, values and institutions that are associated with the construction of the country are gendered. The institutions and values of this gendered state always privilege masculinity. Women in Bangladesh have to fight with gender boundaries that assign them a subordinate position within patriarchal ideology, the essential feature of which is domination and supremacy of men and powerlessness and invisibility of women in almost all spheres of their lives.

In Bangladesh, the existing patriarchal system reinforces women's dependency on men, and men have strong reservations regarding women in leadership and management

positions. Patriarchal values and institutions here do not demonstrate positive and supportive views about women leadership and nobody takes into account the patriarchal norms and institutions which are deeply rooted in the country's politics.

If we look at the statistics, we see that in the 1st Parliament no woman was elected in general seats. In the 2nd Parliament there were only 2 women elected from general seats. The scenario was the same in the 3rd to the 8th Parliaments. Though the number of women elected in general seats in the 9th Parliament was more than that of the previous parliaments, it is very small in comparison to the number of male parliamentarians.

Through the 14th Amendment of the Constitution, the number of reserved seats was raised to 45 in the 9th Parliament. The number of women MPs in the 9th Parliament is 65. It is a

matter of great regret that the women representatives filled the forty-five reserved seats not through direct elections but through nomination of the three hundred elected representatives. More importantly, the experience of women's representation in the Bangladesh Parliament across the years, with such a number and with such a system of election, has raised questions about the effectiveness of women's participation in the parliamentary process.

It has been seen that the women occupying the reserved seats could only play a subservient role with respect to the wishes of the ruling party. They have become voiceless tools at the hands of the major parties in Parliament. Women's representation in the Parliament should be a democratic and effective one; as such, the number of seats for women, whether it is sixty-five or one hundred, should ensure effective representation.

In Bangladesh, the political participation of women in Parliament remains profoundly weak, and the effectiveness of their participation is even weaker. The very small presence of women in the political party structures and in

Parliament is indicative of the very low level of their involvement in the country's political arena as well as in the legislative process. Though political parties in Bangladesh made commitments to women's advancement in their respective election manifestos, in reality they nominated very few female candidates in past elections.

Women MPs sit on every standing committee but their effectiveness is not at all visible to the public. Norris and Lovenduski (1995) identified two interacting causal factors, "supply" and "demand," which result in women's under-representation. The most common explanation for the supply-side factor is that women do not come forward and/or they are not interested in politics. The demand side factor is related mainly to the selectors, or political parties, where such parties discriminate against women's nomination.

If we take a global view, women's representation in our national parliament is not poor in comparison with the other regions of the world. The total woman participation in the parliament is about 16.7% in Asia, while it is about 18.6% in Bangladesh. On a regional basis, the Nordic countries are clearly ahead. So, the proportion of women in the parliament is obviously noticeable when we compare the situation of Bangladesh with some other countries. Statistics shows that Rwanda has done exceptionally well, having 56.3% women parliamentarians, with Sweden placed second.

Women's participation in politics is a big issue for attaining actual democracy and equality. It is also an issue about women's actual citizenship. It is impossible for women to gain power, authority, and honour through indirect election. It makes them dependent on male members of their party. Moreover, members elected through indirect elections cannot feel any accountability for their own election areas.

Article 28 of the Constitution declares that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life. Different NGOs and women activists raise their voice in demanding direct election of women for the reserved seats. When women become members of the parliament through direct elections, their decision-making power, reputation and honour will rise automatically; they will be able to take decisions according to their wish. We have to make a level field for women, which will make their entrance into the country's politics easy.

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Overcoming zinc malnutrition

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ZINC is an important nutrient for humans. Everybody needs zinc, irrespective of age and sex. An adult male needs to consume 4 mg, adult female needs 3 mg, an infant needs 1-3 mg and a child needs 3-5 mg of zinc daily. Pregnant women need 3-6 mg and lactating women need 6 mg daily. If the diet is devoid of animal products and high in phytate, daily zinc intake requirements will increase about threefold. The human body is unable to store zinc in large, readily accessible amounts, so it needs to be consumed daily in relatively small quantities.

Because zinc has to be eaten in such small quantities, it is called a micronutrient. However, the lack of zinc in the diet may result in serious consequences. In infants and young children, zinc deficiency retards growth. Zinc is required for the proper functioning of the human immune system.

Absence of zinc reduces resistance to diseases, increases the frequency and severity of infectious diseases, complicates recovery from illness, and may lead to death. Absence of zinc in pregnant women could have serious outcomes. It may increase the risks of delivery complications, which may lead to the death of mother and fetus. In many cases, it may result in a premature or low birth weight (LBW) baby, whose health, nutrition, and growth may

become risk factors for otherwise preventable disease and death.

Research on zinc is relatively recent and, like in many other countries, direct measures of the prevalence of zinc deficiency are unavailable in Bangladesh. The estimates are obtained from secondary evidence. Secondary evidence of household dietary bio-available zinc intake and the prevalence of stunting suggest that about half of the Bangladeshi households and half of the Bangladeshi children are at risk of zinc deficiency.

According to the World Health Organization, stunting rates of 20% or more in under-five children indicates high overall risk of zinc deficiency. Measured by this criterion Bangladesh belongs to a high zinc deficiency endemic area.

Relief from the dangers of zinc deficiency may include preventive zinc supplementation and eating enough zinc-rich foods. Foods from animal origin, specially shellfish and meat, have high-zinc content. Some lentils and nuts have zinc, but polished rice, wheat, potato, vegetables and other foods from plant origin are not rich sources of zinc.

Foods from animal origin are usually expensive, and the poor cannot afford to eat them in enough quantities every day. This is a reason why zinc deficiency is more frequently observed in poor households than in rich ones.

It is encouraging that HarvestPlus has come

forward to the call of the global micronutrient malnutrition problem. HarvestPlus is an international research organisation founded in 2003 by the Consultative Group in International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and co-convened by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) based in Washington DC, USA, and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) based in Cali, Colombia.

Over 200 scientists belonging to 60 organisations in 40 countries work in collaboration with HarvestPlus. Its aim is to increase the micronutrient contents in staple food crops through bio-fortification, a process called bio-fortification, in order to contribute towards the prevention of micronutrient malnutrition or hidden hunger.

The idea is that, since staple foods are relatively affordable and consumed regularly in relatively large amounts by most poor people, all will automatically get enough micronutrients when they eat the new bio-fortified food. The approach certainly provides a pro-poor, cost effective and sustainable solution to the problem.

At present, HarvestPlus research is going on in nine countries on seven crops in three micronutrients -- in Uganda and Mozambique on vitamin A in sweet potato; in Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo on iron in bean; in Zambia on vitamin A in maize; in India on

iron and zinc in pearl millet; in Nigeria and Democratic Republic of Congo on vitamin A in cassava; in India and Bangladesh on zinc in rice; and in India and Pakistan on zinc in wheat.

So far, significant progress has been made in the research in Bangladesh. Breeders are quite close to finding out a zinc-rich rice variety which is, at the same time, rich in iron, high yielding, profitable and palatable. Trials are in progress to find out the adaptability of this variety to Bangladeshi climate and soils, losses of zinc with milling and cooking, efficacy and effectiveness of the new rice, and the findings are so far encouraging. It is hoped that the new rice variety will be released for widespread cultivation in 2012.

The on-going trials will end and the new variety will be released. But then will begin another challenge, a challenge to promote the variety among farmers and consumers. For this purpose, joint efforts of scientists, input dealers, farmers, millers, rice merchants, extension agents, civil society, media, and all others who are concerned with the rice industry will be needed.

The sooner it can be achieved the faster will be the relief from the problem. HarvestPlus has signed a contract recently with Brac to perform this task, and Brac is working towards that end.

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Metternich's World

JFK... in and before November 1963

WHEN John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963, a whole world went spinning into shock. The reasons were two. The first, which was the more obvious, was that the young handsome politician before whom lay the future and most likely a second term in the White House, had had his life cut short by an assassin's bullet. The second was that it was none other than the president of the United States, its thirty fifth as a matter of fact, who had been murdered.

At the time, the United States, along with the Soviet Union, dominated global politics. In the era of the Cold War, speculation as to who might have been behind the Kennedy assassination quickly set in. The right wing in America lost little time in suggesting that Moscow or Havana or both could have been responsible. Outside America, a pretty good number of people thought the murder had been an inside job, carried out perhaps by the CIA.

The subsequent move by Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, to set up the Warren Commission to inquire into the assassination yielded little result. No specific conclusions were drawn. But, of course, in the immediate aftermath of the assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald, suspected to be the assassin, had been killed by nightclub owner Jack Ruby.

President Kennedy's assassination was, in a significant way, an occasion for global leaders to come together in Washington. Among those who marched behind the horse-drawn cortege making its way to Arlington national cemetery on a cold November day were French President Charles de Gaulle, Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie, Belgium's King Baudouin and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Once the president had been laid to rest, his young widow Jacqueline Bouvier lit the eternal flame on his grave. The flame still burns. And so does nostalgia for JFK, despite all the sordid revelations which have since emerged about his private life. His voracious sexual appetite, which drew into its ever widening circles such women as the actress Marilyn Monroe and a lover of the mobster Sam Giancana, Judith Exner, have damaged the president's reputation considerably.

And yet it was not like this in the days when he set out seeking the presidency. First elected to Congress in 1946, Kennedy set his sights on the Senate. In 1952, as Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon were elected president and vice-president respectively on the Republican ticket, Kennedy trounced Henry Cabot Lodge, the incumbent Massachusetts senator who had devoted too much time to ensuring an Eisenhower-Nixon victory and too little to the danger on his home turf.

JFK was re-elected senator in 1958, a year which also saw Nelson Rockefeller, the great Republican liberal, win the governorship of New York. Earlier, in 1956, Kennedy, desperately in want of the Democratic vice-presidential slot beside Adlai Stevenson, the party's presidential nominee, lost the race to Senator Estes Kefauver. The Stevenson-Kefauver team were beaten badly by Eisenhower and Nixon.

By the time 1960 came round, Kennedy was ready for a shot at the Democratic presidential nomination. There were a couple of problems he faced. The first concerned his rivals, who were formidable politicians themselves. As senate majority leader, Lyndon Johnson had acquired a reputation



John Fitzgerald Kennedy

for getting legislation done across bipartisanship. And Senator Hubert Humphrey, having developed a reputation as a voice of liberalism, considered himself ready for the presidency.

Kennedy's second problem was his Roman Catholic background. Americans were not, in the view of large segments of the intellectual class, yet ready for a Catholic president. In the event, JFK overcame both problems and clinched the nomination. He picked Lyndon Johnson as his vice-presidential running mate. The two men narrowly defeated the Republican Nixon-Lodge team at the November 1960 elections.

President Kennedy's inaugural address remains one of the most profound and poignant in terms of content and the idealism. As he set to work in January 1961, he promised Americans that a US astronaut would land on the moon before the decade was out and safely return to earth. That promise was to be kept when in July 1969, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin walked on the moon for the first time in human history and came back to earth. Nearly six years after Kennedy's death, it was his old rival, President Richard Nixon, who welcomed the astronauts of Apollo 11 back home.

As president, JFK faced down the Soviets over their missiles in Cuba. He sent military advisors to South Vietnam. He formed the Peace Corps. And he initiated civil rights legislation that was to lead to an opening up of broad political space for his country's African-American community.

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When CFOs take over



I have serious bad news! News reports say that the recession has removed the power of Chief Operating Officers, the people who expand companies by investing in jobs and equipment. At the same time, it has raised the power of Chief Financial Officers, the guys who go around destroying expansionist projects with large axes, sometimes literally.

This worries me. I know a CFO. He eats nails for breakfast, sometimes with bits of crucified

former staff members still attached. What can we expect as people like him rise in power?

Here's the answer:

The Staff Manual, As Re-Written by The CFO: Dental coverage: To save costs, from now on, the engineering department will do all tooth extractions.

Blood donation: Employees are reminded not to volunteer to donate blood. Blood donation will be considered theft of company property.

Sick leave: From now on, sick leave must be booked six weeks in advance. Nobody will be allowed to be sick without prior booking. The only exception which is death. Staff members who die need only give four weeks' notice.

Maternity leave: We will maintain full maternity coverage for staff. However, men will from now on fill all positions, which come with pregnancy coverage.

Coffee breaks: The staff canteen will be closed. Staff is recommended to drink a day's

worth of coffee before coming to the office.

Overtime pay: Staff members who work more than the official number of working hours will be paid extra. However, the official number of working hours from now on will be 24 per day.

Child labor: All underage workers on our factory lines have been sacked. However, the "Bring Your Daughter to Work Day" tradition will now be celebrated all year round, for both sexes. We suggest you drop your children off at the factory floor every morning at six am and collect them at six pm.

Minimum wage: A competition will be held for all unit leaders to see who can pay their staff members the lowest wage. The winners will get their salaries on time.

Office supplies: Auditors have calculated that staff steals 12, 273 kilos of office supplies items every year. Each staff member will therefore be required to bring 67 sheets of A4 paper and 20 paperclips from their home to the office

every week.

Staff insurance: Staff will be pleased to hear we have obtained fire and theft insurance. The insurance company will cover, in full, the cost of any items of staff property, which have been stolen while on fire.

Compassionate leave: This will no longer be allowed, as management is unable to understand this concept.

Toilet breaks: To remove the temptation of wasting time in the toilets, all toilets have been removed. Please use the facilities at home before coming to work.

Conclusion: If any employee has any questions about the new arrangements, please write them on paper and deliver them to the factory furnace, where they will help to lower our heating bills.

Thank you and enjoy your day.

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