

# Turning reserved seats into real power for women

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Since independence, Bangladesh has pledged to make politics equally accessible to men and women. To support this, it introduced reserved seats for women in parliament—an affirmative action strategy employed globally to rectify historical injustices and dismantle structural barriers. However, the objective of such measures is not permanence; rather, it is to build a society where women can compete and succeed on an equal footing with men.

We began with 15 reserved seats in 1972. Today, there are 50. On paper, this expansion signals progress. In practice, however, the structure and process of filling these seats—originally intended to amplify women's voices—have become politically ornamental, elite-driven, and disconnected from public legitimacy. Instead of electing women based on public preference and political merit, the system centralises power in the hands of party leadership. As the country charts its democratic future, it is time to reimagine how women enter parliament—not through party patronage, but through public preference and political merit.

Under Bangladesh's current parliamentary structure, 50 seats are reserved for women. These are not filled through direct elections but allocated to political parties in proportion to the general seats (out of 300) they win. After the election, parties nominate women of their choice to these reserved seats entirely at their discretion and without any voter input.

While this arrangement was originally intended to ensure gender balance, in practice, it has created a system where representation is

symbolic but not substantive. Since these nominations take place behind closed doors and are not subject to public scrutiny or electoral competition, they often reflect party loyalty rather than public service credentials.

Too often, parties treat these seats as rewards for insiders—selecting the wives, daughters, or close relatives of influential leaders, or women with no proven record of political engagement or policy knowledge. In some cases, nominees have lacked the capacity to speak effectively in parliament, propose

legislation, or represent women's interests. This undermines the promise of gender inclusion, reducing it to tokenism and eroding the credibility of women's representation.

Rather than nurturing future female leaders, the current system risks entrenching cronyism and gatekeeping within male-dominated party structures. Many women MPs feel sidelined, treated more as guests at public events than as lawmakers. The result is symbolic representation with little substance. Consequently, the very objective of reserved seats—empowering women to participate in and shape national policymaking—is often defeated. This is not how affirmative action should function. It should elevate qualified women into leadership. It should prepare them to contest general seats and lead with legitimacy.

Some have proposed holding direct elections for the reserved seats. But this, too, presents practical and fairness challenges. One version suggests that each reserved seat should represent three constituencies combined—a burden no general MP bears.

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More importantly, this would make the reserved seats a true reflection of women's political will. A party could fail to win a single general seat yet secure reserved seats based on strong support among women. This would open space for newer, smaller, or reformist parties to build a women-centric political base, encouraging competition centred on women's rights and representation.

Second, another reform concerns the timing of party nominations. Currently,

the first time, women voters would directly influence which women represent them.

Moreover, this would foster internal democracy by requiring parties to identify and prepare women leaders before the election, rather than selecting loyalists once results are declared. It would also help build a pipeline of competent female politicians who are prepared to lead.

Third, while reserved seats remain, reserved-seat MPs should be given more defined political roles. Assigning them clear portfolios—such as



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

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it displace strong male candidates and create political resentment? Separate "women-only" and "general" seats could also reinforce the notion that women can only win when men are excluded. That is not equality; it is a workaround that risks backfiring.

Rather than introducing new fairness issues, Bangladesh can reform the existing system to make it more democratic and accountable, while planning for its gradual phase-out.

First, a more empowering and politically accountable model would allocate reserved seats based on the percentage of women's votes each party receives. Since male and female ballots are already cast in separate boxes at polling stations, the Election Commission could easily tabulate party-wise support among women voters without any major administrative overhaul.

This reform would incentivise political parties to genuinely engage with women voters, campaign on gender-responsive platforms, and prioritise women's issues. Parties that previously took women's votes for granted would now have a direct stake in

parties nominate women for reserved seats only after the general election. This backroom process is opaque and unaccountable. Instead, parties should be required to submit a list or panel of female nominees—proportionate to the number of general seats they are contesting—before the election. For example, if a party contests all 300 general seats, it must nominate 50 female candidates for the reserved seats, just as it announces candidates for general seats.

This would create transparency and allow for public scrutiny. Voters, especially women, could evaluate who the party is promoting as future lawmakers. If a party nominates unqualified or token candidates, it risks losing support from female voters, which would, in turn, affect its share of reserved seats under the vote-based system.

This reform would push parties to nominate capable women, engage seriously with female voters, and campaign on women's rights and concerns. It would compel them to engage substantively with women voters and campaign on relevant policy issues. For

oversight of specific ministries or coordination zones—would increase their authority and relevance.

It is worth noting that some women leaders already contest general seats through direct elections. Many have succeeded, and many more will. The goal of reserved seats is to ensure interim equity until women achieve full participation in regular elections. The answer is not to make women's entry harder, but to ensure their voices are heard more meaningfully within the current framework.

Ultimately, the aim must be to phase out quotas as women gain parity in electoral representation. Reserved seats should not become permanent structures, but temporary scaffolding for a more inclusive democracy. Until then, we must reform how they function—making them more democratic, accountable, and reflective of women's aspirations.

Rather than merely fulfilling a constitutional checkbox, reserved seats should be a mechanism for real political change—where women shape the agenda, hold power, and inspire the next generation of leadership.

## FROM STRAIT OF HORMUZ TO DHAKA

# How a distant crisis could hit our homes



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**BAHAUDDIN FOIZEE**

What if a narrow stretch of water, thousands of miles away, could influence how much you pay for your next meal in Dhaka?

On Sunday, Iran's parliament has passed a bill that could allow the country to shut down the Strait of Hormuz if deemed necessary, although the final decision rests with the Supreme National Security Council. This comes in response to recent escalations in Israel's war on Iran, particularly after the US carried out strikes on three key nuclear sites in Iran. But if the Strait of Hormuz bill is implemented, its consequences would ripple far beyond the Middle East, reaching even Bangladesh. Those effects might be visible from our petrol pumps to kitchen markets.

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most strategically vital maritime chokepoints. More than 20 million barrels of oil, which is roughly 20 percent of global daily consumption, flow through it each day, connecting oil-rich countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to markets across Europe and Asia. Any blockade or significant disruption in this strait might dramatically affect these global oil and gas supply chains.

And when supply falls, prices

inevitably rise.

For instance, if Iran does proceed to shut down the strait, global oil prices could see a sharp increase. Analysts cited by *The Washington Post* suggest that crude oil could easily climb to well over \$100 per barrel. Such a spike would have knock-on effects across the world—including in Bangladesh—impacting areas such as transport, electricity, industrial production, agriculture, and ultimately household finances.

A significant portion of our electricity supply depends on imported oil and gas. If global prices rise, the government will face tough decisions between increasing subsidies at the expense of taxpayers or passing the costs on to consumers. In either case, ordinary households will be left to bear the brunt, primarily through higher electricity and cooking gas bills.

Transportation and agriculture, two key pillars of our economy, are also vulnerable to fuel price hikes. Public buses, cargo trucks and lorries all run on diesel or petrol, so higher fuel costs would push up the fares and logistics expenses. Diesel is also used for irrigation pumps, while both fuels power the vehicles that transport crops from rural

fields to city markets. The combined effect would, therefore, be a rise in the prices of essentials such as rice, lentils and vegetables, further straining household budgets.

There's more to this. When energy and transport costs go up, production expenses in industrial units and factories rise as well. This can also push up the prices of everyday consumer goods. For lower-middle-income families already operating on tight budgets, this could make life more difficult. A household earning, say, Tk 20,000 a month may find its expenses rising to Tk 25,000, necessitating difficult adjustments.

Moreover, the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Gulf region could also be affected. Qatar, one of the world's leading LNG exporters, transports most of its shipments through the Strait of Hormuz. Any disruption in this route would affect LNG availability and pricing, with potential implications for Bangladesh's power grid and cooking gas supplies.

At a time when inflation and recession risks are already looming over the US, Europe and parts of Asia, another shock to the oil and gas markets could push the global economy into deeper trouble, one that developing countries like Bangladesh would find especially difficult to withstand. Indeed, Bangladesh, because of its overreliance on imports, might be one of the firsts to feel the pinch and one of the last to recover. That said, the speed of impact and recovery will ultimately depend on a range of factors including its policy

response, reserves, alternative fuel contracts, as well as global response.

Iran, no doubt, understands the global economic stakes of closing the strait. It is itself a major oil exporter and remains deeply tied to the international energy market. One hopes that Tehran views the Strait of Hormuz bill as a strategic instrument rather than a tactical step and, accordingly, resists the urge to weaponise a chokepoint so vital to the global economy.

If, nevertheless, the situation escalates, a coordinated response from other key global players—including Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, China and the UAE—will be critical. They must work to ensure that vital international shipping lanes remain open and oil markets are kept stable.

To many of us in Bangladesh, the prospect of the Strait of Hormuz being closed may seem like a distant and abstract issue—just another geopolitical development in the headlines. But if the strait is indeed blocked, it may not be long before the repercussions are felt at our own cities and homes.

It may sound poetic at this stage of the Iran-Israel-US conflict, but the truth remains that diplomacy—not war—must be the way forward in this crisis or those that may follow. This is a lesson that the US and Israel should also take to heart. For us in Bangladesh, however, there is little to do but watch, wait, and hope that world leaders will act with urgency, restraint, and a sense of global responsibility.

**সিলেট গ্যাস ফিল্ডস লিমিটেড**  
(পেট্রোবাংলার একটি কোম্পানি)  
**Sylhet Gas Fields Limited**  
(A Company of Petrobangla)

গ্যাস জাতিয় সম্পদ।  
এর অপব্যয় রোধ করে জাতির  
সামগ্রিক পালন করুন।

Ref No. : 28.20.9153.000.287.30.0001.25 Date: 22-06-2025

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e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for procurement of the following works, details are given below.

Sl No.	Description of Works	Tender ID	Last selling of Tender (Date & Time)	Tender Closing & Opening (Date & Time)
01.	Procurement of Supply and Installation Cathodic Protection (CP) system for the gas gathering pipelines of Sylhet Gas Fields Limited [Unit-1: Well No. BB-2 (L=2.61km & DN=6") at Beanibazar Gas Field and Unit-2: Well No. RP-03 (L=1.50km & DN=8"); Well No. RP-04 (L=7.00km & DN=6"); Well No. RP-05 (L=1.70km & DN=6") & Well No. RP-07 (L=10.60 km & DN=6") at Rashidpur Gas Field] Sylhet.	Tender ID: 1117376	13-Jul-2025 17:00 Hours	14-Jul-2025 15:00 Hours

- 1) This is an online Tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.
- 2) To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP System portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.
- 3) The fees for downloading the e-Tender Document from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited through any registered bank's branch.
- 4) Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System portal and from e-GP help desk [helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd](mailto:helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)

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GD-1447