

# **Women in Parliament**

## *Process & Extent of Participation, and Scope for Strengthening their Role*



*Prepared for*

**PRODIP**



**The Asia Foundation**

*Prepared by*



**Human Development Research Centre**

[www.hdrc-bd.com](http://www.hdrc-bd.com)

Dhaka: November 2012

# Women in Parliament

## *Process and Extent of Participation, and Scope for Strengthening their Role*

*Prepared by*

Abul Barkat <sup>1</sup>  
Subhash Kumar Sen Gupta <sup>2</sup>  
Abdullah-Al-Hussain <sup>3</sup>  
Sk. Ali Ahmed <sup>4</sup>  
Md. Osman Ali <sup>2</sup>  
Asmar Osman <sup>2</sup>  
Manzuma Ahsan <sup>4</sup>  
Md. Ismail Hossain <sup>5</sup>



**Human Development Research Centre**

[www.hdrc-bd.com](http://www.hdrc-bd.com)

*Prepared for*

**PRODIP  
The Asia Foundation  
Bangladesh**

Dhaka: November 2012

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka; Chief Advisor (Hon.), HDRC & Study Team Leader

<sup>2</sup> Research Consultant, HDRC

<sup>3</sup> Deputy Director, Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development

<sup>4</sup> Research Associate, HDRC

<sup>5</sup> Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Kumudini Government College

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Women's representation in Bangladesh Parliament appears to be satisfactory at least in terms of quantitative representation. However, the problem of women's effective representation in the Parliament is still under-researched. It is almost unexplored what role the women Parliamentarians play in the Parliament. At this backdrop, PRODIP, The Asia Foundation-Bangladesh intended to explore this topic. Accordingly, Human Development Research Centre (HDRC) was awarded to conduct the study. The current study, examined the issue and problems related to gender inequality, political discrimination in the Parliament and thereby examined current status of women representativeness and role taking scenario, and also ascertained appropriate way to ensure effective representation of women in Parliament.

The successful administering of this study would not have been possible without the commitment and dedication of all those who were involved in this process.

We are grateful to all staff members of the Asia Foundation-Bangladesh for their excellent cooperation in this study. The enthusiasm of Hasan M Mazumdar (Country Representative, The Asia Foundation-Bangladesh) towards the study is highly appreciable. We are particularly grateful to Russell Pepe (Chief of Party, PRODIP), Kazi Maruful Islam (Director, RM&E-PRODIP), Mafizur Rahman (Senior Program Officer, RM&E –PRODIP), and Samsun Noor (Program Officer, RM&E –PRODIP) for their stimulating inputs, constant care and help, unstinted support and constructive advice at all the stages of this research work. We also thank Rubaiat Reza Khan (Program Officer, RM&E –PRODIP), Farzana Meherin (Senior Program Officer, CSO-PRODIP), and Kartick Mandal (Senior Program Officer, CSO-PRODIP).

We are indebted to all our key informants – particularly, the Honorable Members of Parliament - without whose outstanding support, successful completion of the study could not have been possible. We are grateful to them for providing us with valuable information and insights on the subject. However, it is worthy to mention that throughout the report, name of key informants have not been disclosed in any form to maintain the basic research ethics of non-disclosure of the informants.

We are especially thankful for excellent support from the Bangladesh Parliament Secretariat. Namely, we are thankful to Md. Mahfuzur Rahman (Secretary In-Charge, Bangladesh Parliament Secretariat), and Md. Ali Akbar (Assistant Research Officer, Bangladesh Parliament Secretariat).

We are grateful to the Honorable Members of Parliament, who participated in the Preliminary Research Findings Sharing Workshop and National Dissemination Workshop and put forward their valuable comments and suggestions on the study. In this regard, we especially thank – A N Mahfuza Khatun Baby Maudud MP, Asma Zarin Jumu MP, Farida Rahman MP, Jobeda Khatoon MP, Meher Afroze Chumki MP, Nilufar Chowdhury Moni MP, Principal Khadija Khatun Shefali MP, Rowshan Jahan Shathi MP, Ruby Rahman MP, Rumana Mahmood MP and Sagufta Yasmin MP.

We are also grateful to Professor Rounaq Jahan (CDP), Moshir Rahman (BARD), Sadia Shabnam (Democracy Watch), Shirin Banu (PRIP-Trust), Talaya Rahman (Democracy Watch) and Tosiba Kashem (Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers Association) for their participation in the Preliminary Research Findings Sharing and National Dissemination Workshop.

The in-house staff members of HDRC worked untiringly at all the stages. We thank all those lovely and uncomplaining souls at HDRC.



Prof. Abul Barkat, Ph.D.  
Study Team Leader

&

Chief Advisor (Hon.), HDRC

Dhaka: November 26, 2012

## *Abbreviations*

APPG	All Party Parliament Group
ASK	Ain o Salish Kendra
BDAWL	Bangladesh Alliance for Women Leadership
CEDAW	Conference on Elimination of Discrimination Against women
CHRI	Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
DAW	Division for the Advancement of Women
DESA	Department of Economic and Social Affairs
EPA	Enemy Property Act
HDRC	Human Development Research centre
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
KII	Key Informant Interview
LIC	Legislative Information Centre
MEP	Members of the European Parliament
MJF	Manusher Jonno Foundation
MMC	Mass-Line Media Centre
MoI	Ministry of Information
MoLJPA	Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs
MP	Members of Parliament
MSP	Members of the Scottish Parliament
NFOWD	National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled
NGO	Non-Government Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPAC	On-line Public Access Catalogue
PET	People's Empowerment Trust
RTI	The Right to Information
TIB	Transparency International Bangladesh
UFC	Uniform Family Code
UN	United Nations
VAW	Violence against Women
VPA	Vested Property Act
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

Parliaments are the key institution in a representative democracy. In most countries, Parliament's core functions are enshrined in the Constitution as encompassing *legislation*, *oversight* and *representation*. In addition, Parliaments are typically responsible for *passing the budget*, thereby permitting the executive to carry out its program. Parliament also has an important role, although not always covered up constitutionally, to ensure that the governance process is *inclusive*; that is, that all segments of the population, including the women, are adequately represented.

In Bangladesh, women are exercising their voting rights from 1954. A key measure of women empowerment in society at large is their participation in politics. The representation of women and the inclusion of their perspective and experience into the decision-making process thus inevitably lead to solutions that are more viable and satisfy a broader range of social needs. It is obvious that the mere number of women representatives in National Parliament may not sufficient enough to ensure women's participation in decision-making bodies. Nonetheless, their presence at Parliament fulfills the necessary condition of gender equality and process of empowerment.

The presence of significant number of women representation (around 20% of all Members of Parliament) in Bangladesh National Parliament with two women leaders at the top has worked effectively to enhance the interest and confidence in women as political actors. The quantity of women representation in the Parliament at present cannot be ruled out because it gives sense of solidarity and strength. Women are coming in the Parliament both through *direct election* and *reserve seats*. There were 15 reserved seats for ten years as per Constitution of 1972. An amendment in 1978 increased this number of reserved seat to 30 for fifteen years. The system of reserving 30 seats for 10 years was reinstated through 10<sup>th</sup> amendment of the Constitution in 1990. The 14<sup>th</sup> amendment Bill of the Constitution raised the quota of reserved seats to 45. The number of reserved seats in Parliament has been increased from 45 to 50 through the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution which are to be distributed proportionately among the sitting political parties in the Parliament. It is also evident that the share of directly elected women as Member of Parliament (MPs) has increased trend in the last 40 years. The increasing representation of women MPs in Bangladesh seems satisfactory. The global statistics shows that 20 per cent of the MPs are women, where the proportion is similar for Bangladesh.

## Purpose and Objective

With about 20 per cent women's representation in the Parliament, Bangladesh's situation seems quite satisfactory. But, does it ensure active and adequate participation? Representation could be of two types: quantitative (in numbers) and qualitative (as effective agency role player). Only representation does not ensure role playing or participation or to be more specific, empowerment. In Bangladesh, the issue of women's effective representation in the Parliament is still under-studied. The research, therefore, examines the current issues and problem related to gender inequality and political discrimination in the Parliament, and, thereby assesses current status of women representativeness and role taking scenario and finds out appropriate way to ensure effective representation of women in Parliament as legislator.

## Methodology

This research attempted to identify functions of Parliament to examine whether women MPs play their role effectively. As law making is the prime responsibility of the Parliamentarians, the study delves into the role of women representatives in law making process in the Parliament. It is evident from the procedural stages that there are a number of areas and point where the MPs can play significant role. Since the total procedure and involvement of the MPs in different stages of legislation is recorded and preserved, an analysis of the total process and involvement of the Members clearly reveal the extent of their participation or role taking scenario for each of the Bills passed as an Act. At this backdrop, the participation of women MPs has been analyzed critically, and as required, also been compared with that of their counterparts, the male MPs. This study examined –in the present (Ninth) Parliament to what extent women MPs played role at different stages of the procedures—from the start (Presentation of Bills) to approval of the Acts. The study team had interviewed 43 key informants using an open-ended questionnaire highlighting the issues under the key research questions. The key informants include the Honorable MPs, officials of the National Parliament, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Bangladesh Election Commission, representative of women organizations, representatives of election observer groups, and civil society members. The study is mostly qualitative in nature. However, quantitative data was collected from various sources, namely- Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, National Parliament Secretariat, and Bangladesh Election Commission. To validate the preliminary research findings, a workshop was organized with the Honorable MPs.

## Key Findings

The Parliament in most countries including in Bangladesh is by any standard a male-dominated political institution. Patriarchal system reinforces women’s dependency on men, and men have strong reservations regarding women in leadership positions. It has been observed that fewer women are nominated for Parliamentary election in Bangladesh. This may partly be due to women’s less involvement in politics and partly due to the reluctance of political parties to nominate women. One women MP told the research team: *“We have nominal power in expressing our opinion. The top leaders of the party decide all. If democracy is not adequately practiced in the party, there is little scope to see good democratic practice in the country”*. However, in the 9<sup>th</sup> Parliament election, significantly a higher number of women was nominated compared to the previous election- though, it is not yet satisfactory. The general failure of women in national election can be explained in terms of their inability to confront the monetary demands required for success. However, this is not true only for women; it is true for all prospective candidates. Majority of the women MPs interviewed in this study argued that – *“when we have to rely on the money of our husband or father or brother for participating in the election- then certainly it becomes difficult to raise voice as much as the men.”*

It is noticeable, despite a conservative society and the extent of both visible and invisible barriers; women in Bangladesh are becoming more interested in participating in politics. Political parties cannot, therefore, blame women for not wanting to participate. Rather, party elites (mostly *male*) appear to be the main opponents of women’s political representation in Bangladesh. Thus, demand or political factors seem to be the most crucial issues that need to be addressed in order to increase women’s Parliamentary representation in Bangladesh.

Due to the extensive work span of Ministers, they have to involve intensively with the business of the Parliament. Therefore, this scenario leads to time limitation for Private Members (*i.e.*, *MPs other than Ministers*). At this backdrop, women MPs find it more challenging to get adequate time in private members session, particularly due to their small proportion in number in Parliament. However, female MPs have argued that they are provided with less time than the male MPs. One women MP said: “*Definitely, we are provided with less time than the male MPs. When male MP requests for some additional time during his debate, in many cases they are provided with that additional time; but, in case of female MPs, we almost never get additional time for our discussion.*”

The absenteeism of both male and female MPs in the Parliament is same (10% on average). But, the actual picture, according to the key informants, is different. According to the key informants it has been reported that if an individual MP’s total days of presence is calculated in a session, then it would certainly show that women MPs attendance is much higher compared to the male MPs. It is reported that the presence of women lawmakers (especially from the reserve seats) in the treasury bench helps the Parliament to have quorum for policy decision and passing Bill. It is learnt that female MPs from the reserved seats are punctual in attendance compared to elected male MP.

Within the Rules of Procedure of Parliament, MPs can raise question to relevant Ministers. Rule 71 deals with *calling attention to the matter of urgent public importance* and Rule 71A is *statement of a Member on matter of urgent public importance*. While data was analyzed, it has been revealed that participation of women in Parliament under these Rules are satisfactory compared to the male members. In the Question-Answer Session (Rule 42 of the Rules of Procedure), participation of women Parliamentarians is also satisfactory compared to that of male counterparts.

The representation of female MPs in the Standing Committees is less compared to that of the male MPs. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Parliament, among 525 members of Standing Committees (in 51 Committees) 84 (16%) are women. There are 56 male MPs working in 2 Standing Committees, where number of women MPs is only 1 (*among the Ministry related Parliamentary Standing Committee*). If this is calculated relating to the Parliamentary Standing Committee, then the figures are not much different. It has also been reported that insignificant number of women MPs from reserve seats are working with more than one Standing Committee. In four Standing Committees (including *Standing Committee on Ministry of Health and Family Welfare*) there are no representations of any women MP. However, some of the MPs have argued that the women MPs who participate in the committee functions adequately though their number is minimal. Selection of Chairperson for different Parliamentary Standing Committees is not gender balanced. A patriarchal mindset of political party in power works in selecting the Chairperson of the committees. Among the 51 Committees, only 3 are chaired by women members. Among the total 179 Bills that have been passed up to 13<sup>th</sup> Session by the 9<sup>th</sup> Parliament, number of Bills that have been initiated by the Women Members are 19, which is 11 per cent of the total. All this Bills are Government Bill and introduced by the concerned Ministers, and it is to be noted that, since there are female Minister, the opportunity to move the Government Bills in the Parliament is held by them. There is no single move for leave to introduce Private member’s Bill by women MPs in this Parliament yet.

In the Parliamentary process and functions, there is very little scope available for Private Members (MPs other than Ministers) to get involved in the Law Making process. In practice, participation of female members is usually limited to exercise voting power of MP. None among the respondent has introduced any Private Bill. In fact, in the history of the last 40 years of the Parliament of Bangladesh, only 7 Bills passed were moved by the Private Members and three out of seven Private Members Bills were initiated by women MPs. It is reported from Female Member in Reserved Seat that when they have introduced any private Bills; it is treated as “read” and ultimately rejected. One women MP said: “*When a Bill is passed and enacted as law, no discussion was held with us before hand. When the Bill is tabled in the Parliament, the Bill is read to us and we hear it and agree to pass it*”.

Parliament is guided by its Rules of Procedure. But, in many cases, the MPs are not adequately trained on this Rules of Procedure. Most of the MPs, especially, the Female MPs interviewed in this study had reported that they do not understand adequately and are not aware of all details of the lawmaking process (consisted of 27 steps and Procedures) from initiation to end. There is need of extensive orientation on this, especially, for the new MPs in the Parliament. However, it has also been reported by the women MPs that their participation in such training is not satisfactory.

Women MPs elected from the reserved seats in fact had no effective Constituency as the elected MPs. Increase in reserve seats may not seem to be associated with qualitative change in women representation in the Parliament in general and legislation in particular. Without accountability to any Constituency, the provision of reserved seats restricts women’s effective participation in the decision-making and legislation process. In this study a number of women MPs from reserve seats were interviewed. Most of them have opined that many of the women MPs from the reserve seats are capable enough to compete in the direct election. They also stated that they lack two ‘M’- ‘Money’ and ‘Muscle’. If these two ‘M’s could be deducted or at least be reduced from the election procedure, a large number of women will be elected as MPs without using the provision of reserve seats. They also argued that in many cases in the constituency of an elected MP and other MP from reserve seat do not cooperate rather treat them as ‘competitor’.

It has also been learnt that there is dearth of active and effective Caucus in the Bangladesh Parliament. A number of key informants (including male and female MPs) have opined that effective Caucus is one of the most useful instruments for a participatory Parliamentary democracy – which need to be initiated with high priority.

There is lack of freedom of discussion of Parliamentarians and their position is party position. The Article 70 of the Constitution that prohibits them floor-crossing and forbids expressing views against the party decision regarding any policy mater and legislation in the Parliament. Article 70 of the Constitution states, “*A person elected as a Member of Parliament in an election at which he was nominated as a candidate by a political party shall vacate his seat if he resigns from that party or votes in the Parliament against the party*”. Hence, they have to Vote ‘YES’. In fact, this scenario prevents the members to get involved in the proposed Bill. On the other hand, when opposition member moves the motion, they become rejected by the Vote as they are minority in the Parliament. Moreover, continuously boycotting the Parliament prevents them from doing anything on the Bills proposed in Parliament. At this stage, it is likely that woman MPs have little scope to involve in law making process of Parliament. Their involvement in the functions of Parliament (including Parliamentary Standing Committee) is limited to some routine work only. Most of the key informants (the

honorable MPs) have argued that Article 70 of the Constitution needs to be relaxed or reformulated to ensure that the Parliamentarians are allowed to speak and express their views, make debates and cast their votes independently except in a no-confidence motion.

### Recommendations

1. **Inclusion of women MPs in Standing Committees needs to be increased.** As the Standing Committees play an important role at the first stage of the Law making processes, women Parliamentarians should be included in all the concerned committees.
2. **Women MPs need to be oriented and trained in detail on Parliamentary Procedures especially on the *Rules of Procedure*.** This is because; these rules are mandatory for every member of the Parliament which imparts them with knowledge about legislative norms and regulations inside the house. In line with this, ‘Gender sensitivity’ should be incorporated in the *Rules of Procedure* to recognize issues and problems of women in the Parliament and to look at how women MPs can act and are treated inside there.
3. **Caucus of women MPs needs to be formed assigning high priority.** This will let women MPs to share information, ideas, resources, and support. The Caucus can be based on networks which may be party-based, cross party (very rare), local, regional and international. Meetings, conferences, seminars, newsletters, and electronic mail links are useful networking devices. Also, consultations with women's organizations and research in measuring the needs of women and their practical constraints enable women MPs in shaping their activities that will be most useful and effective.
4. **Committees/Sub committees comprising women MPs can be formed who can work with *Public Hearing*.** The *Public Hearing* can be about Bills, Laws, or any other particular matter related to the legislative processes. Various contemporary and complex issues can be sorted out on which the committees and the sub-committees would be formed. These committees would go to the particular place and have first-hand experiences on the problem, and then they would report to the concerned cabinet or standing committees for a practicable action.
5. **Women MPs’ involvement in Petitions on Public Interest needs to be enhanced.** There are scopes for the women Parliamentarians to be involved in this process, but still their participation into this particular process is lower in numbers, which should be increased more.
6. **Role of women MPs need to be ensured in various steps of legislation process, especially *Private Member’s Bill, Discussion on matter of Public Interest, and public opinion in the Parliament.*** The possible areas of further participation by the women MPs are: *introducing Private Members’ Bill, at the time of consideration of a Bill, in the discussion on the Bill referred to Standing committee or Select Committee, debate on the report of the standing/select committee report submitted to the Parliament move amendment on the Bill, and present and participation at the time of submission of Bill clause by clause.* Participation of women MPs in the above mentioned activities could be encouraged and ensured by the Honorable Speaker. Standing Committee on Private Members’ Bills and Resolutions may recommend more time allocation for the discussion on Private Members’ Bill.

7. **Duration of Parliament session (working hours) needs to be increased.** If Parliament starts the business sessions from morning in the working days, then the duration of some works might increase and the MPs may have more time allocations and can get the chance to be involved more. Also, there should be a Parliamentary calendar so that the MPs can have an idea about the schedule and may prepare themselves to join in the session fully and effectively.
8. **Allocation of area for women MPs in reserve seat needs to be designed strategically.** One matter that hinders women Parliamentarian's progress is that, the constituency of women member in the reserved seat is larger than the territorial constituency areas (from where male/female is elected in general seats). The particular area out of this constituency is to be determined strategically so that women MPs in the reserved seat can be able to increase their intensive public connection and have chance to provide service in the areas.
9. **Number of Private Members' Days compared to that of Government Days needs to be increased.** As because, the number of Private Members are higher than the Cabinet Members; so the Bills, Petitions, Motions, and other important matters coming from the Private members need to be taken more. For this reason, the number of days allocated for them also must be increased.
10. **Women friendly working environment in Parliament Bhaban (Parliament Building) should be initiated** so that women Members become capable of making expected contribution. They should be motivated to use existing library, computer, and internet facilities and also be provided with separate office-rooms, wash rooms, and other logistic facilities in order to make themselves well equipped to participate in the discussion and debate in the Parliament.
11. **Active participation of opposition in the Parliament need to be ensured** for an effective participation of the women MPs. In this respect – the mass media, NGOs, civil society and human rights activists should play active roles to inculcate the attitude of tolerance, mutual respect, and cooperation among the MPs in deliberating and debating on various issues with a view to make the Parliament a central institution of democracy. Therefore, a 'Code of Parliamentary Conduct' is required to formulate and be adopted to avoid wasting of valuable time.
12. **Article 70 of the Constitution needs to be relaxed or reformulated**, which says that – “[A person elected as a member of Parliament at an election at which he was nominated as a candidate by a political party shall vacate his seat if he – (a) resigns from that party; or (b) votes in Parliament against that party; but shall not thereby be disqualified for subsequent election as a member of Parliament.]” Relaxation or reformulation of this Article needs to be made to ensure that the Parliamentarians are allowed to speak and express their views, make debates and cast their votes independently except in a no-confidence motion.