

*Alangkar or Ahangkar?*  
Reserved-Seat Women Members in the  
Bangladesh Parliament

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Bangladesh has a unicameral parliament. It is composed of 350 members, of whom 300 are elected from single-member constituencies on popular votes, while 50 seats are reserved for women to be distributed among different parliamentary parties on the basis of a proportional system. The constitution, which came into effect on December 16, 1972, one year after independence, provided for reservation of seats for women for a

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certain period of time. Initially, 15 seats were reserved for women to be elected by popularly elected members of parliament (MPs). The number of seats reserved for women increased to 30 in 1979, 45 in 2004, and 50 in 2010. The mode of election was changed in 2004 when the provision for proportional representation was introduced. Until the introduction of this amendment, the constitution provided for the election of (reserved) women MPs by those elected from general seats. This policy allowed the party winning a plurality of seats to claim all of the seats reserved for women. This ‘winner takes all’ policy caused serious resentment among women’s organizations that not only sought a change in it but also demanded that parties make public commitments to nominate at least one-third of women candidates in general elections.

Reserved-seat women parliamentarians (RSWPs), numbering 30 in the 1980s, were once referred to as 30 sets of *alangkar* (ornament) by a popular national weekly on their election in 1986, which caused serious uproar and forced its editor to flee the country. Those elected to parliament in a similar manner a quarter-century later have claimed themselves to be the *ahangkar* (pride) of the nation. The two notions are different—one totally undermines the contribution of women representatives by relegating their role to a decorative one, while the later probably overestimates the potential role of women representatives. Both assertions need empirical probing. This chapter investigates the role of ‘quota women’—those elected indirectly to the parliament—now numbering 50, using the notions of descriptive representation and substantive representation developed by Pitkin (1967). Empirical evidence shows that the ‘quota women’ are not as docile as people often tend to assume; they have, in fact, fared better than women elected on popular votes, referred here as direct-seat women parliamentarians (DSWPs), in performing parliamentary functions (see Ahmed 2013). Several factors, however, still discourage them from playing a major proactive role. This paper identifies those factors, based on a review of secondary literature and parliamentary records as well as in-depth focus group discussion with several women MPs, and examines their implications for empowering women in parliament.

### PARLIAMENTARY RULES AND MP’S ROLE DEFINITION

Formally, Bangladesh has a women-friendly parliament. The Bangladesh Parliament has more women members than many other legislatures. Bangladesh ranks 89th in terms of the representation of women in

parliament worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Women also hold most of the important leadership positions including the positions of the Speaker, the Leader of the House, the Deputy Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition. Nowhere can one find a representative assembly as dominated by women, at least theoretically, as in Bangladesh. Such domination, however, is more formal than real, as we shall see later. Women face considerable difficulties to assert themselves, much more than their male colleagues, and RSWPs remain doubly disadvantaged, both in relation to their male colleagues and also women elected on popular votes.

The extent to which women parliamentarians or, for that matter, MPs as a group, can play a proactive role depends not only on their number, but also on several other factors of which three are important: the extent to which they understand the rules governing the operation of the House, their readiness as well as ability to use the rules, and their willingness to change the rules if they do not find these adequate to play a proactive role (Karam and Lovenduski 2005). Much of what is done in the parliament takes place in a structured way; to be able to influence any parliamentary decision is to understand the rules. No one, however, can expect an MP to have a good grasp of the rules overnight; it is a learning process which may take a long time for an MP to have mastery over rules. It depends largely on the age of the MP in parliament—her/his experience as a lawmaker. It is expected that the longer an individual works in an institution, the better is the prospect of learning the rules.

Experience, however, shows that there is no automatic relationship between the level of competence an MP possesses and his/her nature of activism in the parliament. The extent to which an MP is able to make his/her presence felt by others in parliament depends on many factors, of which knowledge about rules is only one, albeit an important criterion. Two other criteria—willingness and ability of members to be proactive—are critically important. Willingness is referred here as the motivation of members to do what is expected of them, while ability is referred mostly to their level of competence. Both are influenced by a number of variables such as the formal-legal status a parliament enjoys, the nature of the party system, and political culture. Legislatures do not exist in a vacuum; the very existence of a legislature is derived from a constitution (Olson and Norton 1996, p. 4). The constitution provides the basic framework, delineating the formal relationship of legislature with other organs of government, prescribing its formal scope of work and setting the guideline for regulating the behavior of members (Ahmed 2002). If the parliament

remains seriously disadvantaged vis-a-vis other sources of power, its members, no matter how competent they are, will find it difficult to make any significant contribution.

Yet experience shows that the main hindrance to the willingness of an MP to use rules depends not as much on the constitutional system as on the type(s) of the party system a country adopts. An MP may find his/her role largely constrained even in countries where a parliament formally enjoys an 'exalted' status as in Bangladesh. The scope to work independently of party dictates is an important factor that will determine whether an MP will be willing to influence the parliamentary outcome in any significant way. If members are seen as delegates, the other personal attributes are unlikely to have any significant influence.

In Bangladesh, the constitution restricts floor crossing and prescribes a delegate role for the MPs. An MP who is elected as a nominee of a particular party cannot vote against her or his own party in the parliament. Nor can he/she abstain from voting defying party directives failing which he/she risks losing the membership of parliament. One can notice a high-level concentration of power/authority in the party's top leader. The Prime Minister, for example, has traditionally held the position of the Leader of the House, the Leader of the Parliamentary Party, and, most importantly, the head of the (organizational wing) party. Nothing moves within the parliament or outside of it without her concurrence. Those willing to use rules have to be careful before proposing any particular course of action. Any proposal to change the rules without the consent of the party leadership is fraught with risk; the latter may look upon this type of activity with suspicion.

On the whole, there exist serious impediments to the use of rules by MPs, no matter whether they are men or women; any attempt to change the rules appears to be risky. No one in Bangladesh now wants to be labeled as a 'reformist'; everyone wants to define his/her roles and responsibilities in a way that is not likely to challenge the status quo. This, however, does not mean that MPs always remain inert. What it perhaps implies is that there are limits to MPs aspiring to become policy advocates or parliament (wo)men, to borrow Searing's terminology (1994). Policy advocates are those who seek to initiate policy and/or to influence it. The government apparently enjoys monopoly over the policy process; it does not want to share this (power) with others, not even with MPs. Nor can one find any serious demand by the MPs for

participation in the policymaking process. Nor do they have access to support and services needed to become policy advocates in Bangladesh.

If there is not much scope for the MPs to engage in policy debates, neither can they hope to become ‘good’ parliament men—those absorbed by the conduct of business in parliament (Searing 1994). Parliament (wo)men are focused on ensuring that the interest of parliament is protected. They spend most of their time in parliament and are not immersed in the process of representation. Reasons discouraging MPs to become ‘good’ parliament (wo)men in Bangladesh are many and varied; these range from time constraints and procedural difficulties faced by members, to negative attitude of government. Only a few MPs are full-time politicians. Most are business people (53.5% in the present parliament) who have to invest significant time to respond to the demands of their other roles. Career politicians do not have much scope to enter the parliament. Even if MPs are willing to be parliament men, they are likely to face various difficulties.

The parliament does not meet very frequently. The average number of sitting days per year (75) is exceedingly low, so also is the average length of each sitting day (3.32 h). In both respects, the parliament of Bangladesh lags far behind other parliaments.<sup>2</sup> Procedural constraints also discourage the private members to become parliament men. Most of the MPs (in Bangladesh and also elsewhere) thus want to become good ‘constituency members’—those who do not look up but down (Saalfeld and Muller 1997, p. 10). Their priority is to provide services to their constituencies, either of a collective or individual kind. This does not imply that other categories of MPs lack constituency orientation. In fact, all MPs do some constituency work much of the time. However, compared with other categories of MPs, constituency members, as their names suggest, are more interested in promoting the interests of their constituents than other aspects of their multifaceted job.

RSWPs, however, remain disadvantaged in one important respect. They are not elected from any geographic constituency; rather, they owe their(s) election to party leaders. Theoretically speaking, they have better scope to become policy advocates or parliament women. Unlike the directly elected women MPs (DSWPs) who, as a matter of necessity, have to spend a large part of their time and resources to satisfy the needs and priorities of their constituents, RSWPs may try to specialize in higher-order activities (e.g., concentrating on policy/national issues). The way(s) MPs, particularly RSWPs, define their role and the manner in

which their role definition differs with that of DSWPs will be explained in subsequent sections.

### SCOPE FOR PARTICIPATION

Formally, men and women lawmakers in Bangladesh—no matter if they are directly elected or elected from reserved seats—enjoy similar powers, privileges, and facilities; both have an equal opportunity to perform different parliamentary functions, particularly lawmaking and oversight of the executive. The Rules of Procedure (RoP) do not discriminate one against the other. Although the lawmaking process in Bangladesh is dominated by the government, as in other Westminster-style democracies, there is scope for private members to move bills and legislative matters. Rule 72 provides that any member other than a minister can seek to introduce a bill by giving 15 days notice in advance. A private member means a member other than a minister (Bangladesh Parliament 2007).

The RoP allows an MP to utilize several techniques to raise and popularize different issues and also to require the executive government to account for its actions. According to RoP, the first hour of every sitting is available for asking and answering of questions. An MP has the opportunity to ask questions that require an oral answer or written answer. There are also provisions for short-notice questions and supplementary questions. As in Britain, there also exists in the Bangladesh Parliament provision for Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQT). The Prime Minister now answers the questions of the MPs once a week (every Wednesday when the parliament is in session). MPs can also raise motions demanding the adjournment of the business of the House for the purpose of discussing a matter of recent and urgent public importance. They can also call the attention of a minister to any matter of urgent public importance (CAM) and ask for half-an-hour discussion (HHD) on a matter of public importance which has been the subject of a recent question, and the answer to which needs clarification on a matter of fact. Provisions also exist for short discussion (SD) on issues requiring immediate action, and an MP can make statements on matters of urgent public importance (SM). All these motions moved in the House require ministerial response. MPs can also move private members' resolutions demanding government actions, or/and support. Besides, the formal debates on the president's speech made at the beginning of each calendar year and, in particular, the debate on the budget speech by the finance minister in the

middle of the year also provide for some scope to the MPs to scrutinize the activities of the government (Ahmed 2002, p. 108).

There are, however, certain limits to the use of different techniques. None of the motions can be moved without advance notice being given to the Parliament Secretariat. The various devices, however, are not subject to similar types of constraints. Thus, while questions (except PMQT) can be asked and call-attention motions moved in every sitting day except on the day the annual budget is presented, half-an-hour discussion and discussion for short duration can be held only twice a week. The latter, however, can be moved at short notice: two hours before the commencement of a sitting, while an MP who wants to ask questions to a minister has to give at least fifteen clear days notice. Besides, each technique is subject to certain other constraints; in particular, these have to satisfy a number of conditions before being accepted. These restrictions are, however, found not only in Bangladesh but also in the Westminster (House of Commons 2015) and the parliaments patterned after it (Kaul 1979). Different west European parliaments also impose many of these restrictions (Wiberg 1995). These are needed, among others, to ensure that the parliament maximizes its use of time. The way(s) women MPs in Bangladesh have tried to utilize different techniques will be explored in subsequent sections.

## WOMEN IN THE PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS

As stated earlier, both men and women lawmakers formally have equal access to different parliamentary techniques. Reality, however, sharply differs with what is being written in the Rules Book. Women MPs lag far behind male legislators in moving private members' bills. According to parliamentary records, most of the private members' bills moved in the parliament between 1991 and 2015 (203) were initiated by 'male' parliamentarians. Women members so far moved only four bills—two in the fifth parliament and two in the seventh parliament. All except one have dealt with issues related to women. One of the bills provided for changing the composition of the parliament, reserving at least one-third (100) of the 300 seats for women. The other two women-related bills, which were moved in the fifth parliament, provided for replacing the arbitration of family disputes by an arbitration council headed by the local UP chairman by a *Munsif* Court. However, if not all bills moved by women MPs dealt with women's issues, neither can it be said that bills moved by

male private members always lack any focus on women. Record shows that 'male' parliamentarians also have moved some bills that provide for better representation of women in parliament or to correct injustices inflicted on women. For example, the Domestic Violence (Prevention, Protection and Compensation) Bill, submitted by one Dhaka male MP to the Parliament Secretariat in 2009, provided for stringent punishment for those involved in violence. Such violence affects women more than the others.

Several 'male' members of the seventh and eighth parliaments moved private members' bills, proposing reinstatement of the provision for reserved seats for women and/or increasing the number of reserved seats and changing modalities for election. For example, one of the bills proposed for dividing the country into 30 zones for the purpose of electing the reserved-seat women parliamentarians, with directly elected MPs from each zone forming an electoral college for electing a woman parliamentarian. In contrast to the earlier system when an MP had 30 votes, the new system would allow an MP to cast one vote. Another bill by a 'male' MP provided for increasing the number of women MPs to 64, with each district electing a woman MP. Another MP moved a bill entitled The Oppression of Women and Children (Special Provision) (Amendment) Bill, 1997, providing for stringent punishment for those involved in oppression of women and children. All of these bills were moved by 'male' private members; none was enacted into a law.

An important bill was also moved by the Minister for Women and Family Affairs, a RSWP, which was subsequently made into a law. The law, entitled Domestic Violence Act (DVA), provides for preventing domestic violence and to provide protection to victims of violence. The bill originated in civil society. Usually, such bills do not have much prospect of success as these often lack government support. But the DVA case was different. Part of the reason was the strong commitment of the Minister who had links with CSO movements and was a staunch supporter of women's empowerment. She played an instrumental role in ensuring that the bill had an easy passage at different stages and succeeded in overcoming whatever resistance came from different sources.

Women MPs, however, have fared better in asking questions and raising other motions than in initiating legislation. On average, they asked 8% of the oral questions, 14% of supplementary questions, and nearly 13% of written questions in five parliaments (5, 7, and 8–10). Some differences in the nature of activism of MPs in different parliaments can be



noticed. Of the five, the ninth parliament appears to be an exception. Nearly 19% of the oral questions and 25% of the supplementary questions in this parliament were raised by women MPs. Women members in the ninth parliament lagged behind their counterparts in the tenth parliament in respect of moving written questions in the House, and eighth parliament in raising supplementary questions. More written questions by women were also answered in this (9th) parliament than in earlier legislatures. Women MPs in the ninth parliament also fared better than their predecessors in moving different types of motions. More than a quarter of the statements made on matters of urgent importance and one-fifth of call-attention motions were moved by women MPs; the scope of activism slightly decreased in the tenth parliament, although it was much higher than what could be noticed in earlier parliaments (5th, 7th, and 8th parliaments) (Table 2.1).

Overall, women members in the eighth parliament trailed behind their counterparts in other parliaments in asking questions and moving other types of motions. The main reason was that it did not have many women members during the first three years of its operation. The ‘quota’ women in the eighth parliament were elected more than three years after its inauguration; hence, they did not have much time to play a

**Table 2.1** Nature of women MP activism (1991–2015)

Parliament	No. and % of Women MPs	Questions asked <sup>a</sup> (% of total)			% of total questions asked N = 931	Other motions moved <sup>b</sup> (% of total)		
		Oral N = 402	Supplementary N = 315	Written N = 214		CAM moved N = 364	SM N = 1820	SD held N = 5
5	34 (10.3)	4.8	10.2	5.2	6.6	12.2	9.4	4.4
7	38 (11.5)	5.1	8.9	3.4	6.2	14.8	17.1	11.1
8	52 (15.1)	1.5	28.2	1.1	2.0	7.1	5.5	0.0
9	70 (20.0)	18.7	25.5	6.8	15.8	21.1	25.6	0.0
10	71 (20.3)	13.3	14.6	22.3	16.0	25.8	17.6	0.0
Average	53	8.4	14.2	12.9	10.8	14.1	15.1	5.3

<sup>a</sup>Questions asked by women MPs in two sessions each of the fifth parliament (1991–1995), the seventh parliament (1996–2001), the eighth parliament (2001–2006), one session of the ninth parliament (2009–2013), and two sessions of the tenth parliament (2014–). Calculations have been made by the authors

<sup>b</sup>Motions moved by women MPs in the fifth, seventh, eighth, and ninth parliaments and first eight sessions of the tenth parliament. Calculations have been made by the authors

Source Ahmed (2013); Bangladesh Parliament (2014–15)

proactive role. Moreover, there were only a few directly elected women in the eighth parliament. On the other hand, as stated earlier, women in the ninth parliament showed greater enthusiasm in moving different types of motions. One of the important reasons was that the ninth parliament had the largest number of women members (70) until then, many of whom had long experiences in both parliamentary and party politics. The ninth parliament amended the constitution in 2011, increasing the number of RSWPs from 45 to 50.

An increase in descriptive description, which initially took place during the tenure of the eighth parliament, however, did not have much positive impact as the change came very late. On the other hand, the decision to elect reserved-seat women MPs immediately after the inauguration of the ninth parliament and the tenth parliament turned out to be advantageous from several standpoints. In particular, an early election of RSWPs helped them promote the cause of women better as they had more time to focus on different issues including those related to empowerment of women.

The change in descriptive representation has had some kind of positive impact. As stated earlier, following the change in descriptive representation, the number of motions moved increased substantially in the ninth and tenth parliaments. Those who were elected indirectly appeared to be more active than the popularly elected women MPs. Table 2.2 shows the nature of activism of the two groups of women MPs—DSWPs and RSWPs.<sup>3</sup> DSWPs trail behind the latter (RSWPs) in almost every

**Table 2.2** Types of motions moved by two categories of women MPs (1991–2015)

<i>Types of women MPs</i> N = 265	<i>Questions asked</i>			<i>Total questions</i> N = 931	<i>Other major types of motions moved</i>		<i>Total</i> N = 3115
	<i>Oral</i> N = 402	<i>Supplementary</i> N = 315	<i>Written</i> N = 214		<i>Call-attention moved</i> N = 364	<i>Statements made</i> N = 1820	
DSWPs (22.6%)	11.2	7.2	15.4	10.8	6.6	4.6	7.4
RSWPs (77.4%)	88.8	92.8	84.6	89.2	93.4	95.4	92.6

Source Same as Table 2.1

respect. The percentage of questions asked and other motions moved by the latter is much higher than the former. The issue orientation of different types of motions moved by the two categories of women parliamentarians will be discussed in the next section.

### ISSUE ORIENTATION OF MOTIONS MOVED BY WOMEN MPs

The RSWPs can be seen as more than onlookers as the discussion in earlier sections reveals; they fare better than women elected on popular votes and even ‘male’ MPs in moving different types of motions. Why do they fare better than others will be explained in a subsequent section. This section explores the behavioral orientation of the ‘quota’ women and compares it with that of their popularly elected counterparts. To ease comparison, issues raised and promoted by MPs, particularly women MPs, have been grouped into several categories. These are: issues that directly focus on women, women-related issues, economic issues, local development issues, national issues and problems, and others.

Table 2.3 shows the issue orientation of different types of motions moved by the women MPs. It reveals that women parliamentarians use call-attention motions more than the other techniques to popularize (directly) women and women-related issues; on the other hand, local level/constituency development issues find more prominence in Statements on Matters of Importance (71A), while questions deal mostly with national issues and problems as well as local development issues. What is, however, clearly evident is that less than one in ten motions directly focuses on women or deals with women-related issues. Women parliamentarians do not seem to be much keen to promote women’s issues; to the contrary, they are apparently more interested in raising constituency-related issues than other matters.

One can also notice some differences in the issue orientation of the two groups of women parliamentarians. In general, RSWPs appear to be equally active in using different types of motions; their motions also focus on all different types of issues. This perhaps reconfirms an earlier assertion that RSWPs are not to be seen as mere *alangkar*; they play an important role in keeping the parliament alive. However, DSWPs outnumber the ‘quota’ women in moving motions aimed at promoting constituency interests. The difference is quite obvious. Those elected on

**Table 2.3** Issue orientation of different types of motions

<i>Categories of motions</i>	<i>Nature of issues raised</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>Directly focused on women</i>	<i>Women-related issues</i>	<i>Economic issues</i>	<i>Local development issues</i>	<i>National issues and problems</i>	<i>Others</i>	
Questions <i>N</i> = 904 <sup>a</sup>	7.7	3.3	1.6	44.5	28.7	14.2	100.0
Call-attention motions <i>N</i> = 364	11.3	4.9	0.8	34.1	11.8	37.1	100.0
Statement on matters of importance <i>N</i> = 1820	7.6	2.7	0.8	52.4	10.2	26.3	100.0

*Source* Same as Table 2.1

<sup>a</sup>Issue orientation of 27 questions could not be ascertained

popular votes ignore their constituents and issues that interest them at their own peril. Since elections have become much more competitive in recent years than in the past, those who want to get reelected have to give special attention to what their constituents want.

On the other hand, those who owe their election to the parliament through parties and/or leaders (RSWPs) do not have to worry much about what local people think. Under the existing system, women elected from reserved seats do not have any territorial constituency; hence, they do not have to be as much concerned about the support of the locality as their directly elected colleagues. This is, however, not to argue that indirectly elected women totally neglect local development issues. Nearly half of the motions (except questions) moved by RSWPs focus on local issues. Like DSWPs, those elected indirectly also use more time and energy to promote local/constituency issues. The nature of activism of the two groups of MPs in highlighting different issues can be seen from Table 2.4.

### EXPLAINING WOMEN MP BEHAVIOR

It has been observed that RSWPs appear to be comparatively more active, moving more motions on the floor of the House than the DSWPs. An average DSWP moved 0.4 call-attention motions, made 1.5 statements of urgent importance, and asked 1.9 questions. In contrast, a

**Table 2.4** Issue orientation of motions moved by two categories of women MPs

	<i>Types of motions</i>							
	CAM 71 (N = 364)		71A (N = 1820)		68 (N = 5)		Questions (N = 904)	
	DSWPs N = 24	RSWPs N = 340	DSWPs N = 84	RSWPs N = 1736	DSWPs N = 0	RSWPs N = 5	DSWPs N = 102	RSWPs N = 802
Directly focused on women	8.3	11.2	2.4	7.8	-	14.3	9.8	7.5
Women-related issues	4.2	4.1	4.8	2.4	-	-	5.9	2.9
Economic issues	4.2	1.5	3.6	0.6	-	-	0.9	1.7
Local development issues	50.0	32.9	64.3	52.2	-	-	45.1	44.4
National issues and problems	12.5	14.1	13.0	11.2	33.3	14.3	28.4	28.7
Others	20.8	36.2	11.9	25.8	66.7	71.4	9.8	14.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source Same as Table 2.1

RSWP moved 1.7 call-attention motions, made 8.5 statements on matters of urgent importance, and asked 3.9 questions between 1991 and 2015. Call-attention motions (CAMs) moved by RSWPs and urgent statements they have made also focus more on women's issues and women-related issues than those popularized by DSWPs. On the other hand, questions by DSWPs have greater women focus than those asked by RSWPs. Their motions also focus more on constituency issues than those moved by RSWPs. This difference, however, decreased substantially in the tenth parliament. Almost a similar percentage of questions asked by the two categories of women parliamentarians in the tenth parliament have dealt with constituency issues.

As stated earlier, directly elected parliamentarians often pay special attention to promoting the interests of their constituents. They usually spend more time and resources attempting to keep their constituents happy. Since MPs expect constituency work to yield more electoral pay-offs than other activities, they are likely to engage in it (Ahmed 2015). In fact, constituency work is more important for reelection than is policymaking or oversight. As Fiorina (1977, pp. 43–45) has observed:

By taking explicit stands on policy matters [in the USA], the member will make friends as well as enemies. In contrast, constituency work is not so controversial. Moreover, the members will have more difficulty to claim credit for his policymaking initiatives than for his constituency work because members of a legislature make policy collectively but perform constituency work individually. Finally, the benefits from constituency work are more immediate and concrete than policy outputs.

Effective member–constituent relationships also contribute to democracy by strengthening the people's connection to their government, and by providing 'real life' assessments of how government programs are actually working on the ground.

One can, however, notice that RSWPs are also no less constituency-oriented than those elected on popular votes. No RSWP has an independent constituency, but each of the 50 RSWPs is given responsibility for a certain number of constituencies, some in their home districts, and others in different districts. Yet experience shows that RSWPs tend to be at least as serious as their elected colleagues in visiting their home constituencies. As stated earlier, DSWPs appear to be less active than RSWPs in terms of raising different issues in parliament. Part of the reason is that

only a few DSWPs are backbenchers in the real sense; most of them hold senior leadership positions in their parties or in parliament. They usually do not take part in parliament proceedings unless important issues find prominence.

As an example, reference can be made to the DSWPs in the current tenth parliament. Of the 16 DSWPs belonging to the ruling party (AL), only two can be considered as backbenchers in the real sense. Among the other 14 MPs, one is the Speaker, one is the Prime Minister and Leader of the House, one the Deputy Leader of the House, three are ministers, three are former ministers and now committee chairs, one is a whip and another one is a former whip, and two are committee chairs. The leader of the JP is the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament. These people generally do not take part in parliament proceedings. In fact, the four backbenchers moved almost all of the (AL) motions in the House.

The above observation is, however, not intended to idealize the role of the RSWPs, all of whom except one are backbenchers. As with DSWPs, most of the RSWPs do not play an active role in parliament, although it is difficult to identify the extent to which lack of preparedness or party restrictions account for this. Some RSWPs have observed that they are apparently needed to form quorum and to sustain the government; they are discouraged by leadership to play any proactive role. As one RSWP observed:

Sometimes directives are issued from policy forums of the party asking [the MPs] to use offensive remarks against the opponents. To comply with such directives one has to forget [the value of] principles and morals and play the role of a ‘quarrelsome’ lady to keep the leaders of the party happy. If that can be done successfully, leaders are full of praise and commendation. If not, condemnations are forthcoming. To them, everything is alright if the party chief or members of the party policy forums are happy. Our responsibility is to ‘say sir’, ‘yes sir’ to everything. We have no other thing to do (*The Manabkantha*, January 8, 2017).

Another RSWP concurred:

RSWPs are used to make the Sangsad glamorous and to overcome quorum crises ... As they are elected MPs as nominees of the party, they have to remain busy keeping senior leaders happy and doing what they want (*The Manabkantha*, January 8, 2017).

One RSWP once moved several amendments to a bill, some of which were also accepted. Yet rather than appreciating her role, the party secretary general subsequently criticized her for overactivism. Other RSWPs thus have learnt lessons from this example [not to be proactive] (*The Manabkantha*, January 8, 2017). Thus, an important reason prompting RSWPs to focus on constituency issues is their apparent ‘inability’ to raise legislative/policy issues in parliament. These constraints apply to almost all MPs, no matter if they are men or women, or directly or indirectly elected. Reference has been made to this structural constraint in an earlier section. Suffice it here to mention that the MPs in Bangladesh lack freedom to define their role independently of party control.

What is evident from the above is that the representation of women has improved—from 34 in 1991, to 71 in 2016, although it has not yet reached the ‘critical mass’ level, and data show an increase in the nature of activism of the MPs. However, such an increase in activism falls short of any major improvement in substantive representation of women. Several conditions still remain unfulfilled: willingness of women MPs to act together on behalf of women, their ability to cross party lines, if necessary, and scope for reaching out to male colleagues—conditions that are necessary to make descriptive representation meaningful. RSWPs face considerable difficulties in raising important issues. Even motions moved on issues related to women can be seen as negligible (8.8%).

### CONSTRAINTS FACING WOMEN MPs

Members of parliament (MPs) in Bangladesh remain disadvantaged in several respects. Women are doubly disadvantaged and face more problems than their male counterparts while carrying out their business. In particular, RSWPs, who, as observed in earlier sections, fare better than the others in almost every respect, face obstacles from several sources. As an example, reference can be made to the opposition to the consideration of private members bills initiated by a RSWP in the fifth parliament. The bill, as stated earlier, provided for a minor change in the local arbitration process by replacing the chairman of the UP by a judicial official as head of arbitration council. Several ruling party MPs as well as ministers sought to resist the bill at almost every stage of the parliamentary process, arguing (erroneously) that the spirit of the bill was contrary to *Shariah*. They also observed that the bill, if enacted, would hurt the sentiments of the Muslim community. Farida



Rahman, a RSWP who initiated the bill, was not allowed to defend the bill.

Barrister Rabeya Bhuiyan, a RSWP, also moved a bill in the seventh parliament that was extremely important; it provided for reserving one-third of seats in parliament for women. The Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions (CPMBR) recommended the introduction of the amendment bill. But it never had the first reading. At one stage, it lapsed. However, the bill on domestic violence moved by the (then) Minister for Women Affairs, a RSWP, could become a law for several reasons, of which the special relationship of the minister with the Prime Minister was very important. Those opposing the bill were aware of this relationship. Moreover, the bill had a strong source of support among CSOs which the opponents could rarely underestimate.

RSWPs are also discriminated against in several ways. They are given less time to speak on the floor, and it is always difficult to convince the Chief Whip of the need for time to speak in the House. One RSWP attending the FGD referred to the difficulty of accessing the Chief Whip in the following way:

Both men and women MPs are [formally] equal. But you're a woman, that's the problem. Women get less time [to speak] and are allowed to speak at less important time ... You've to turn to the Chief Whip [and whips] almost begging for time. But they will go to other (male) MPs and request: 'you speak', 'you speak' ... But women MPs, especially RSWPs, often go to the Chief whip and say, 'I want to speak'. The Chief Whip is all in all ... he decides who is to do what ... Our situation is vulnerable.<sup>4</sup>

Not all of those who want to speak are allowed time. Some are allotted time. For that, cautioned the RSWP, 'one needs to have a "special qualification" that we do not have. To be able to influence the decision of the Chief Whip, they have to do many things that we do not do or will never be able to do.'

RSWPs are also given less allocation for development. They receive one-third of the allocation that a popularly elected MP receives for test relief (TR) and food for works program (KABIKHA). Technically, a RSWP does not have a specified constituency to represent. However, she is given she is given responsibility for several upazilas(6/7), but does not receive any allocation for their development. On the other hand, a popularly elected MP is entitled to recommend infrastructural projects worth

TK. 40 million every year for his/her constituency to be implemented by contractors. Many other privileges and facilities granted to a directly elected MP are not given to RSWPs. For example, MPs are made chairs of governing bodies of high schools and colleges, but RSWPs are not allowed to be even members. Nor do RSWPs have any role to play in the working of local councils, particularly the Upazila Parishad (UZP) and Zila Parishad (ZP). Local government laws require different councils to mandatorily seek the opinion of the local MP before undertaking any activity and by local MP, people usually mean constituency MP. RSWPs are mostly ignored; they are not apparently considered to be MPs. One RSWP, in conversation with the authors, confirmed it. She observed:

I'm a woman. I am addressed as a 'woman' MP, whereas a constituency MP is addressed as an MP. I am introduced in different functions as a reserved seat woman parliamentarian and people do it almost religiously. Like a man, I have been involved in politics and political activities for a long time. I am associated with all front organizations of the party. Despite having involvement with so many organizational activities, when I'm introduced in such a way I feel bad ... seriously bad.<sup>5</sup>

Patriarchy is widely evident. In fact, one of the greatest hurdles to the empowerment of RSWP is patriarchy. A national daily quotes a RSWP in the following way: 'It is really sad that many of our elected male colleagues do not look upon [us] with respect. Some of them tease us as parliament's "call girls."' Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is working for the empowerment of women. But many of her party MPs strongly believe in patriarchy—immersed in patriarchal values and beliefs.' (*Amader Shomoy*, March 3, 2016). Patriarchy is strongly entrenched in other institutions of the society—family, party, and even the judiciary. Narrating the difficulties faced in her early years in politics, one RSWP attending the FGD observed:

My brothers and sisters were all good students. I also did extremely well in my SSC and HSC examinations securing a position in the merit list in the latter. When I started politics after getting admitted at the University of Dhaka, my brothers told my father: "She has become a liability for the family. We cannot face others for her ... people can see her pictures in the newspapers ... she has been spoiled. Abba (father), you do something; otherwise we [family] will be in trouble and such a good student's career

will be spoiled ... family members did not allow me even to attend any invitation. Now when they take pride saying that our sister is an MP, I try to scold them and make them responsible for torturing me mentally ... Only one male member in the family was my protector – my father. He always supported me and after my marriage, my father in law also defended me.<sup>6</sup>

Another RSWP attending the FGD also had similar experience when she was actively involved in Student League [a front organization of AL] politics in the 1990s. She used to live in a Dhaka University student hostel. Although one of her first uncles used to live in Dhaka, she did not have easy access to his house as she was involved in student politics. Her uncle used to remind her that her mother sent her money not for doing politics but for study. Whenever there was any unrest in the university or hostel and students were asked to leave hostels immediately, she used to go to her friends' houses. Her uncle and aunt did not approve of her doing politics. Yet when she became an MP, her aunt called her seeking help to solve some problems. Other relatives also ask for help since she is an MP. But their mindset has not changed yet. Still now, many relatives or people in the so-called high societies do not want to accept them, although they readily seek to enjoy advantages.

RSWPs face opposition from various sources, for example, parties, DSPs, DSWPs, and hybrid politicians. Some RSWPs consider their election from the reserved seat as a stepping stone to be associated with mainstream politics—electoral politics. Their target, as some have observed, is to get elected on popular votes. Yet the task is not an easy one. Perhaps, the greatest challenge comes from DSPs, referred here as constituency MPs. They consider RSWPs as their main adversaries, rivals. One RSWP observed that her constituency MP does not visit the constituency very often. On the other, she spends much more time in the constituency than the DSP and has better links with the people. Yet, he is called the 'elected' and she as the 'reserved' MP. She finds it disgraceful when some people say: 'even though you are an MP, you are still not equal to him.' This hurts her.

RSWPs usually try to build a constituency with a view to preparing themselves for party nomination in the next election. This risks RSWPs becoming the target of attack by DSWPs. Many RSWPs spend more time in their own areas than DSWPs. Some consider the present DSWPs as their competitors and thus try to raise issues in parliament that concern the people of their own areas as a means to appeal to them for votes

in the future. Usually, a RSWP is likely to face greater hostility from a constituency MP if both have responsibilities for the same constituency. Conflict between the two is likely to be inevitable in these constituencies than in areas where the two hold responsibilities for separate constituencies.

One national daily observed that a directly elected MP once threatened a RSWP from abroad when he came to know that the latter would attend a prize-giving ceremony in their constituency. He observed that the ‘reservist’ was not to be considered as an MP, so she should not be allowed to enter into the constituency. In fact, supporters of the MP attacked the function in presence of the RSWP; many children were wounded. Since then, the RSWP secretly visits the constituency when the constituency MP is not there (*Bangladesh Protidin*, February 4, 2016). Similar cases have been reported from other constituencies. One Dhaka MP used to take a female party leader with him wherever he used to go or whenever he held meetings. However, he started behaving differently after she became an MP. The two now consider each other as adversaries, not allies, as in the past. A RSWP, who was a directly elected MP in the last parliament, argued that the latter has better contact with the electorate than the former. The people of the constituency do not appear to be as enthusiastic now as they were during her last term as a directly elected MP (*Bangladesh Protidin*, February 4, 2016).

RSWPs observed that one must understand that they wanted to have a political career. Many of them have travelled a long way to reach this position. They are not political ‘novices.’ But the recent trend toward encouraging hybrids to join parliamentary politics is likely to cause one of the main threats to democratic consolidation in the country. In fact, those who have a glorious political past feel very threatened because of the quick rise of hybrids, especially daughters of ministers/MPs. As one RSWP observed:

There are two trends in AL politics: daughters of ministers/MPs think that they are owners, and we’re laborers. You’ve got two/three (seats of MP) – that’s more than enough. We will get the majority because our fathers did it. In fact, we are now more concerned about our survival. Nomination is somewhat become secondary. Many have entered the parliament without knowing when to say ‘Joy Bangla’, “Joy Bangabadhu” ... many hybrids say that at the beginning of the speech; whereas those who have involvement with AL politics know that they have to end their speech by saying so.<sup>7</sup>

Many DSPs consider their parliamentary seats something like private properties; only they have the right to use it; and after their death, only their family members should be entitled to hold offices at any cost. In fact, dynastic succession and familial politics are widely noticed in Bangladesh; these have almost become part of the political culture. Most of the women parliamentarians have been nominated because of their family relations with parties to which they belong. As Jahan (2015, p. 119) has observed:

Family connections are particularly important for women to gain leadership positions in political parties. Many women members of parliament get nomination as successors to their father's or husband's seats. In the ninth parliament, out of the 18 directly elected women MPs (with the exception of Hasina and Khaleda), more than half were dynastic inheritors.

Many of those who cannot be accommodated are assured of/given a place in parliament after elections. The change in the system of election to reserved seats now allows not only the ruling party but also other major parties to adopt this strategy.

Patriarchy, which is widely evident, works in various ways. One RSWP observed that she had held senior positions in a District Women AL for a long time. However, when she asked for a position in the district or upazila AL committee, people started saying that she could not leave the Mahila (Women) Awami League as if she was indispensable for its survival. Actually, it was intended to technically drop her from the race for MP. Two RSWPs observed that AL was probably the most gendered political party in the country. Even BNP was less gendered than the AL; it had three women district presidents/secretaries. Many Awami Leaguers even do not hesitate to ensure defeat of party women candidates so that they do not hold leadership positions. As an example, one RSWP attending our FGD referred to the last municipal mayoral elections. Seven women candidates for mayors were nominated by the AL in seven safe constituencies. But only two got elected; the rest were defeated. One of the important reasons underlying defeat was the support extended to opposition male candidates by many Awami Leaguers, a kind of 'unholy' alliance between two adversaries; the strategy was mostly intended to check the rise of female leadership.

Another important development to be noticed is that it is a fight not only between men and women. The RSWPs and DSWPs also consider

each other as adversaries; one wants to prosper at the expense of the other. The latter do not want to act as mentors to the former; rather, there is some kind of serious competition between the two in some places. Like their male counterparts, women DSWPs are also keen to ensure dynastic domination than to act as role models for new generation of women party activists.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has tried to explore the role of RSWPs in Bangladesh. It shows that although they are not to be seen as *alangkar*, they cannot be considered as *ahangkar* either, however, not for their own failures or faults, but for defects of the context within which they have to work. An average RSWP appears to be more active, at least in terms of moving different types of motions in the parliament, than DSWPs, or even many direct-seat parliamentarians (DSPs). Their motions also focus on a wide variety of issues than those raised by other categories of MPs. However, they face considerable difficulties in charting out a political career for themselves; these problems risk making a RSWP an ‘onlooker’ in the long run or even a mere spectator, if not an *alangkar*.

Male parliamentarians do not appear to have a positive opinion about the role and performance of the RSWPs. Nor does the top party leadership appear to have an inclination to allow RSWPs to have a genuine political career. Experience shows that only a few RSWPs are given a second chance to become an MP. Nor can a RSWP realistically expect to be nominated to a general seat. The top leadership of the party (AL) has warned RSWPs not to try to create separate political spaces for themselves in their constituencies. The Prime Minister has made it clear that RSWPs will not be nominated to contest general seats.<sup>8</sup> This could be seen as a disincentive to those who want to choose politics as a profession. To some extent, it can also be seen as a triumph of patriarchy and familial politics over democracy.

## NOTES

1. <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>. Accessed: October 24, 2016.
2. For example, in Pakistan the National Assembly must meet 130 days a year. In Britain, the House remains in session for 146 days a year. Each sitting day lasts about eight hours. The Indian Parliament meets, on an average, 100 days a year, with each sitting day lasting from 5.2 to 7.3 h.

3. RSWPs and DSWPs differ in a number of respects, e.g., age, income, and connection to power politicians. In this paper, we will focus mostly on their nature of activism in the House. Space limitations will not allow us to dwell on other differences between the two groups of women MPs.
4. FGD held on February 10, 2016.
5. FGD held on February 10, 2016.
6. FGD held on February 10, 2016.
7. FGD held on February 10, 2016.
8. (Ctn24.com., July 26, 2016).

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