

# GENDERED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF THE COVERAGE OF WOMEN POLITICIANS IN THE BANGLADESHI PRESS

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## Abstract

This paper explores the processes of gender construction in political communication as reflected in the Bangladeshi media. It examines the coverage of female candidates during the 2018 general elections in four national Bengali-language newspapers using framing analysis and discourse analysis. It also includes interviews of nine women Members of Parliament to understand their response to the media coverage they do or do not receive in the national press, their own approaches to the media, and suggestions towards making the press more gender-sensitive in its political coverage. Based on the concept of gendered mediation, analysis of the media and interviews of women parliamentarians revealed that women politicians were framed in relation to male mentors; as new, inexperienced and potentially incompetent; and as representatives of women voters only. The findings suggest that the media should promote women more positively in politics by raising awareness of the presence, strength and efforts of women politicians, by covering in depth and evaluating their efforts, accomplishments and impact.

**Keywords:** Gender, Political communication, Media, Framing, Elections, Female politicians

## Introduction

Women today are in positions of senior leadership across a variety of professions, around the world. Yet, they remain an overall small minority. This is also true of politics, where, despite women being in positions of power, in January 2023, 34 women served as Heads of State and/or Government in 31 countries of the 193 United Nations member states. Twenty one percent of the world's ministers and 26 percent of national parliamentarians were women. Women represented 22.8 percent of Cabinet members heading ministries. The five most commonly held

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portfolios by women Cabinet Ministers were women and gender equality, followed by family and children affairs, social inclusion and development, social protection and social security, and indigenous and minority affairs (UN Women, 2023).

In terms of representations, stories about women leaders and politicians by the news media reflect widely circulated gender norms and assumptions. Women as politicians lack ‘news-mediated normalization’ (Trimble 2017) and are still seen as extraordinary. There is substantial research in the area to support this notion of the “symbolic annihilation” of women politicians in the media, especially in a Western context (Baxter 2018, Byerly 2013, Ross 2017, Savigny 2017, Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross 1996, Sreberny & van Zoonen 2000, Trimble 2017, Tuchman, Daniels, & Benet, 1978). Such research shows that through the invisibility of women politicians, focus on “soft” news such as health and education as women’s areas, focus on the personal lives of women politicians (marriage, motherhood, family life), and on style over substance (what men say, believe, do; how women look, talk, feel), politics is shown to be a male activity, and its breach by women shown as inappropriate.

There, however, remains a dearth of research in non-Western contexts in general and in the context of Bangladesh in particular. This absence is even more striking considering the dominance of women leaders in Bangladesh and in South Asia in general over the past several decades.

In this backdrop, this article explores the processes of gender construction in political communication as reflected in the press in Bangladesh. Specifically, it examines the coverage of female candidates during the 2018 general elections in four national Bengali-language newspapers through framing analysis and discourse analysis of text. It also includes interviews of nine women Members of Parliament (MPs) to understand their response to the media coverage they receive or do not receive in the national press, their own approaches to the media, and suggestions towards making the press more gender-sensitive in its political coverage. Based on the concept of gendered mediation, the paper attempts to identify gender-stereotyped frames and discourses around women politicians, and whether their mediated political representations conform to or challenge gender dynamics.

### **Theoretical Context: Gendered Mediation**

News is said to reflect a masculine agenda, where news relevant to women is pushed to the margins and the feminine is “Othered” (Savigny 2017). Political

news in particular undermines women's role in politics through trivialising, marginalising and commodifying women (Ross 2017) and even symbolically annihilating them (Tuchman et al., 1978). Mediated descriptions of women's political ambitions can encourage or deter women's involvement in politics (Trimble 2017) but essentialised representations can be damaging as they send out messages that women are unsuitable for political leadership in a male-dominated profession (Baxter 2018).

As Edwards (2009) explains in her work on rhetoric, representation and display of gender and political communication, gender is performed and displayed, as opposed to being "something located within individuals," and so the prime focus of this paper, too, is on how political communication constitutes gender through self-presentation and representation.

According to Trimble et al:

Media texts are powerful cultural forms, discursively revealing and reinforcing the sex stereotypes and cultural norms that construct gendered identities, and the extent to which these texts are gendered may be a key factor in discouraging qualified women from seeking political leadership positions. (Trimble et al 2013: 463)

This study is theoretically based on the concept of gendered mediation. Linda Trimble defines gendered mediation as 'the ways in which processes and products of news-making reflect gender norms, binaries, and power relations. Gendered mediation represents the intersection of gender regulations, performance of gender, and media practices' (Trimble 2017: 10). According to this thesis, 'news consistently upholds the public man/private woman binary by situating women as anomalous outsiders to politics' (Trimble 2017: 10). Conventional news frames treat the male as normative, and the use of stereotypically masculine imagery subtly serves to reinforce the perception that women do not really belong in politics (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross 1996).

Mercy Ete defines gendered mediation as:

a journalistic practice that reinforces the femininity and masculinity binary in media discourses. It is a reflection of stereotypically gendered narratives common in news reporting. As a journalistic tool, gendered mediation magnifies real and perceived gender differences irrespective of their relevance and context in media reports. It underpins an understanding

of one gender as the normative and the other as the exception in certain areas of public life. (Ette 2020: 1)

As such, gendered mediation reinforces the masculinity-femininity binary in media discourses, focusing on, reflecting and reinforcing stereotypes. It legitimises particular perspectives while delegitimising others that challenge the status quo and has a critical impact on the formation of public opinion (Ette 2020). In the context of political reporting, gendered mediation reflects a male-oriented agenda, privileging the male as the norm, treating women as novelties, and making it harder for the audience to access information about women candidates, thereby reducing people's likelihood to vote for them (Ette 2020: 1).

Through the examination of media frames and discourses, as well as an analysis of interviews with women parliamentarians, this paper explores the notion of gendered mediation in the newspaper coverage of the 2018 general elections in Bangladesh and suggests ways to address and redress it to make political communication more gender-sensitive in the press.

## **Methodology**

### *Framing and discourse*

Frames are the central organising ideas in stories, suggesting ways in which politics should be thought about, encouraging certain interpretation and understanding of events and issues, and what should be done about them (Kinder 2007, Perloff 2014). D'Angelo defines a media frame as 'a written, spoken, graphical, or visual message modality that a communicator uses to contextualize a topic, such as a person, event, episode, or issue, within a text transmitted to receivers by means of mediation' (2017: 1). This study examines media frames of political women in Bangladesh and comes up with several different, sometimes even competing, frames. It then goes on to analyse how these frames contribute to the construction of discourses around women, gender and politics in and through the media.

Discourse, as defined by Michel Foucault, is 'the production of knowledge through language' (cited in Hall 2004: 346), consisting of language as well as practice. While text tends to refer to 'the outward manifestation of a communication event,' discourse examines the context – the actors, their motivations, the environment, medium, evolution of diverse types of communication and their relationship to each other (Garrett & Bell 1998: 3). Discursive practices may have major ideological effects, producing and reproducing unequal power relations (Fairclough & Wodak

2004). Discourse analysis consists of examining patterns of language across texts, in relation to the social and cultural contexts in which they are used, and the effects the use of language has upon social identities and relations and how views of the world and identities are constructed through the use of discourse (Paltridge 2012).

This study has taken a feminist approach to discourse analysis which ‘attends to the discursive (re)production of gendered power relations’ (Trimble 2017: 13). Quoting Lazar (2007), Trimble elaborates:

Feminist approaches to performing critical discourse identify the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities. (Trimble 2017: 13)

Such analysis is important because understanding how news coverage can work to address and redress the discursive barriers to elite political office is important not only for political and/or privileged women but for all women (Trimble 2017: 33).

### *Data*

In order to study the frames and discourses in media coverage of women politicians in the Bangladeshi press, a sample of news stories from four national dailies has been used. These are *Ittefaq*, *Manabzamin*, *Prothom Alo*, and *Dainik Sangram*. These papers have been chosen for their wide readership and varied ideological positions. *Ittefaq*, founded in 1953, is one of the oldest and most widely circulated newspapers in Bangladesh, its owner a MP of the ruling Awami League. *Manabzamin*, first published in 1997, is the country’s first and largest tabloid newspaper. *Prothom Alo*, established in 1998, is the highest circulated national daily, known to be neutral bordering on anti-establishment. *Dainik Sangram*, which began publication in 1970, is inclined towards the right-wing Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. The print editions of *Manabzamin* and *Prothom Alo* were consulted for this study, but due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, the print editions online of *Ittefaq* and *Dainik Sangram* were used, thus the page numbers of the latter two are referred to as front and back pages or the page categories.

All news focusing on women candidates in the 2018 general elections which were held on December 30, as well as the nominations to the reserved seats for women, published between December 1, 2018 to February 28, 2019, have been included

in this sample. The total number of news stories is 290, with 62 from *Ittefaq*, 100 from *Manabzamin*, 91 from *Prothom Alo*, and 37 published in *Dainik Sangram*. A coding sheet with the names of the newspapers, dates and pages on which they were published, the headlines, subjects, images, frames and observations were noted, with the frames colour-coded to reveal patterns.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine women parliamentarians, five of whom directly contested the general elections of 2018, and four of whom were selected as per the quota system of reserved seats for women. The interviews serve to corroborate – or challenge – the media findings, from the perspective of the women being covered, discussing how they view that coverage, as well as eliciting suggestions to address and redress the gendered mediation of female politicians in the Bangladeshi press.

### **Findings: Framing the “Woman Politician”**

Several of the news reports on women candidates before and after the December 2018 elections centred on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s campaign meetings and speeches which focused on her government’s contribution to the development of the nation and the negative role of the opposition party. These may be classified as gender-neutral. Very few reports on the prime minister or even the leader of the then opposition, Begum Khaleda Zia, were gendered. They only made references to gendered relationships when the women themselves did so. For example, the prime minister at one of her campaign meetings referred to the Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury as her daughter, asking people of the constituency to vote for her. *Dainik Sangram* published a report on the prime minister’s speech in which she expressed her pride in being the daughter of the Father of the Nation (*Dainik Sangram*, 28 December 2018, last page). She reportedly said that that was the identity with which she associated herself, rather than that of prime minister, and appealed to the people to do so as well. Even though reference to a male mentor is made in this report, it is in the form of straitjacket reporting and the direct quotation of a speech. Other than being almost invariably referred to as “Bangabandhu konya” or “daughter of Bangabandhu” across the newspapers studied here and being referred to as his “sister” by former president and then leader of the Jatiya Party Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the prime minister’s framing was not found to be gendered. Reports on other, newer female politicians in the newspapers examined told a different story, however.

### *Relationship to male mentors*

The first frame around women politicians in the Bangladeshi press was found to be their relationship to and dependence on male mentors, particularly husbands and fathers. With opposition candidates in jail or legally barred from contesting the polls, their wives replaced them, and the media framed these women as banking on their husbands' popularity and on people's sympathy votes, having no standing of their own. For example, in the case of BNP candidate Tahsina Rushdi Luna whose husband had disappeared some years ago, *Manabzamin* explicitly stated that her strength was her husband's popularity, and Luna herself was quoted as saying she was contesting the polls for her husband and not herself – and ostensibly not for the nation either (ইলিয়াসের জন্যে, 2018). Oikyo Front candidate Barrister Kuri Siddiqui is framed as the “daughter of Bangabir” Kader Siddiqui, on whom the news focused instead of the candidate herself. The media emphasised these relationships to the male so much, that in a *Prothom Alo* report, the sole information provided about one of the candidates other than her name, was that her husband, a former minister of the BNP-led government, was in prison, sentenced to death in two criminal cases (এক আসনে, 2018). Awami League candidate Simin Hossain Rimi was framed across the newspapers as having the support of her brother, a former state minister, which the papers said caused people to be enthusiastic about her candidacy and campaigns, and little if any reference to her own accomplishments. In a later story, however, Rimi was framed as a fair and reasonable candidate, and was quoted on issues of development, women's health and the work she had done around it (কাপাসিয়ায় সবুজ অর্থনীতি, 2018). This slightly more substantive focus on women candidates was somewhat evident over time. In the case of BNP candidate Sansila Zebrin Priyanka, for example, who was initially framed as her jailed politician father's daughter standing in for him, was later asked about policy issues she would focus on if elected (স্বাস্থ্যসেবা নিয়ে কাজ, 2018). While the father-daughter relationship frame remained, this showed a slightly more serious addressing of her as a candidate. Generally, however, female candidates were shown as inseparable from their husbands, fathers and other male mentors, with the news containing little to no information on the candidates themselves.

### *The new, inexperienced female candidate*

This feeds directly into the second media frame of women politicians – that of the new and inexperienced female candidate. For example, *Ittefaq* quoted someone who referred to a female candidate as new and unknown to the people, saying that the party would be making a mistake in nominating her (ফরিদপুর-৪ আসনে,

2018). In a news report about the “battle for votes of two celebrities” (নীলফামারীতে ভেটিয়ুদ্ধে ২ তারকা, 2018), actor and Awami League lawmaker, Asaduzzaman Noor, was represented as an eloquent orator, successful in both the cultural and political arenas, whereas BNP candidate singer Baby Naznin was described as only having started her political journey, and “rolled up her sleeves” and taken it upon herself to “claim a share of Noor’s amiable and smiling image” and popularity. This description formed an image of the male candidate as the rightful claimant to the position, whereas Naznin, known only for her lyrical voice and popular songs, was a newcomer and outsider, almost an imposter. *Prothom Alo*, too, focused on her music career, with one of her opponents quoted as saying that she may be a popular celebrity, but music and politics were not the same thing, implying that she did not qualify for the latter (হাট বাজারে কথা, 2018).

#### *Women candidates as incompetent*

Women and men were sometimes set up in direct comparison to each other, demonstrating the woman’s incompetence – the third media frame. For example, male politician Saber Hossain Chowdhury was described as experienced, successful and popular, while his opponent, female candidate Afroza Abbas was described as new, spirited, and “a shadow of her husband” (also a BNP leader), often framed in news reports as determined but helpless in the face of competition from the opposition (অভিজ্ঞ সাবের, 2018). In another report, the absence of former president Hussain Muhammad Ershad in the area was described as an opportunity for his opponent Rita Rahman to actively campaign, implying that she would not have been able to compete if he were there (এরশাদ মাঠে নেই, 2018). Women candidates were also often described as being accompanied by their parents and husbands on the campaign trail, as if to highlight their new and inexperienced political positions.

#### *Women politicians for women voters*

A fourth media frame was the association of women candidates with women voters only. Newspapers focused on women candidates campaigning with women voters, visiting them, holding meetings. For example, the news reports on the campaign of Momtaz Begum, a popular singer-turned-politician, published on 23 December 2018 in *Ittefaq* and *Manabzamin* stated that women crowded around her to catch a glimpse of her in person. From veteran politicians such as former minister to the Awami League government, Matia Chowdhury, to newcomers such as BNP candidate Afroza Khan, were reported – and picturised – as being welcomed and supported by women. While this may be a reflection of political strategy and



social norms, whereby women are more comfortable reaching out to other women, such framing also raises questions about whether women politicians are strategic nominees for female voters only.

### *Women standing out*

This study found that, while a handful of stories in *Ittefaq* and *Prothom Alo* focused on the substantial number of women candidates contesting the elections, few went beyond mentioning numbers and names to actual profiles of the women. This was the same in the post-election coverage in January and February 2019 across all four newspapers. Beyond one or two stories on women in the newly formed cabinet, most news reports focused on the nomination process to the reserved seats for women and lists of potential candidates. Only a few were profiles on individual candidates. In *Ittefaq*, one of these was on a former film actor, another on a transgender candidate. Another report was on a woman nominated by the Awami League but who was the wife of a BNP leader and thus the nomination had created controversy. Another profile was on a candidate whose grandfather was a renowned political figure. Such stories suggest that women are individually profiled and highlighted if there is something extraordinary about their candidacy and not necessarily related to their accomplishments.

*Manabzamin* ran the greatest number of reports during this time, including stories on the newly elected MPs and ministers, such as Dipu Moni, in news headlined with “the country’s first woman Minister for Education”, as well as some profile stories on women known to be seeking nomination to the reserved seats. One story titled “Husband mayor, wife minister”, while referring to the woman minister in the headline, focused the whole story on the man, his background, accomplishments, etc. Another report headlined “Actresses sad after not receiving nomination” took a somewhat sarcastic approach to the substantial number of celebrities seeking nomination for women’s reserved seats. Stories in *Manabzamin* and *Prothom Alo*, while running news on women candidates published images mostly of celebrity candidates. Except for *Dainik Sangram*, stories across the other three newspapers covered the candidacy of Sayeda Zakia Noor who was contesting the seat which had belonged to her recently deceased brother, a senior Awami League leader, but all of them in both headlines and news referred to her as “Syed Ashraf’s sister” and contained no information about her. *Dainik Sangram* focused almost exclusively on the nomination and selection process and not on any individual candidates.

### **Analysis and Discussion: Gendered Political Discourse**

The above findings demonstrate how women politicians in the Bangladeshi media are depicted as being women before politicians, highlighted in relation to their male mentors or relationships with men; shown as new, inexperienced, incompetent; as strategic nominees for female voters; or as standing out simply because they are women, for reasons other than their political work. Similar to the research literature in a global context, women politicians in the Bangladeshi media, too, are trivialized and marginalised. However, they are not commodified as such, and due to their relatively significant presence in the country's politics traditionally, their symbolic annihilation is difficult to achieve, yet they remain novelties and marginalised except in cases where they hold top political portfolios, such as the prime minister, Speaker, cabinet ministers, etc.

News stories focusing on women politicians repeatedly referred to them as “women” politicians, whereas news on male politicians was not specified as “males” or “men” contesting the polls. In this way, the media spotlighted women politicians as novelties, as different, as being apart from the norm.

Media coverage of major women political figures, such as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and erstwhile opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia, was for the most part gender-neutral. Neither did gender factor in their own speeches, nor did the media cover them as gendered except for when they themselves made references to their gendered relationships. Also, media coverage of veteran women politicians such as Matia Chowdhury, Sajeda Chowdhury and Sahara Khatun, who were established, with a long history of political activity and leadership and who had served in the government and cabinet previously, was for the most part gender-neutral. For example, veteran politician and former Awami League minister, Matia Chowdhury, was framed as an honest and successful politician who contributed towards hundreds of crores of taka in development work (শেরপুরের তিন আসনেই, 2018).

Women politicians who were rising to the ranks, but were established professionally, be it in business, social activism, etc., were covered more or less neutrally in terms of gender frames as well. However, for newcomers, women still at the entry stage of the political arena, gender mattered. For these women, who their husbands, fathers and brothers were, figured prominently in the media coverage of their campaigns prior to the elections, as well as if they were ultimately elected or selected. For these women, references to their gender, as well as their relationships to male mentors, were all too common. Corroborating the findings of Western literature

on gendered political communication, in the case of Bangladesh, too, marital and family relationships were a key gender frame used to introduce or refer to women political candidates, largely because their candidacy was in many cases rooted in these relationships. So much so, that coverage of campaign events focused on the speeches of fathers of candidates, or references to fathers and husbands within the candidates' speeches themselves.

An interesting case is that of Cox's Bazar MP Shahin Akter, who was nominated after her husband, a former Awami League MP, was not given the party nomination to contest the polls due to allegations of drug-related crimes against him. Newspaper reports showed that some people were not happy with this nomination, while others agreed to support her due to her husband's popularity. *Prothom Alo* in one story reported that other than the wealth statements which belonged to Akter, everything else was her husband's, that is, the campaigns were carried out by her husband, the slogans referred to him, the funding was provided by him, etc. Akter herself referred to her husband in her campaign speeches and used his name and picture in her campaign posters, with her children actively involved in her campaign activities as well, prompting *Prothom Alo* to headline a story "A family affair" (এটি একটি পারিবারিক আয়োজন, 2018). In such cases, the media have no choice but to report on campaigns as they are being carried out. If the candidates themselves highlighted their family members, then this was reflected in the media as well.

The media, however, highlighted women politicians' perceived lack of experience and potential incompetence, particularly in comparison to their more experienced male counterparts. In addition, in the case of wives and daughters of opposition candidates who could not contest the polls due to legal barriers, construction and circulation of a discourse of revenge and justice surrounded the women. As a result, retribution was presented as one of the key objectives for their entering into politics in the first place, rather than political engagement, policymaking, and nation-building. However, not only gender, but political alignment may also have been a factor in the news treatment accorded these women, with party affiliation and power affecting the nature of media coverage.

### **Perception of Female Parliamentarians on Women's Electoral Process**

The above frames reinforce the discourse of politics as a male domain. These findings are mostly supported by the interviews conducted for this study. While some women parliamentarians believe that their media coverage is based on their merit and accomplishments and not biased against or towards their gender, others

claim that women get less coverage simply due to the fact that they are women, unless they say or do something exceptional. Most of the parliamentarians interviewed believed that the media can play a key role in promoting women politicians.

As the media analysis above has shown, coverage of women in the highest ranks of the political hierarchy is generally not gendered. This is corroborated by women in such positions. Speaker Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury said: “I feel the media focus on us as candidates more than as women or any other factor. Our coverage depends on the work we do and the kind of impact we have in our constituency and the people there.”

Veteran politician Matia Chowdhury, while acknowledging that the struggles are greater for women than men in Bangladeshi society, also believes that if these are overcome, women can succeed and are judged on their work, regardless of their gender. The key is to work hard, with sincerity, devotion and tenacity:

You cannot do one decent work and expect to be made a star. I do not expect the level of media coverage that the prime minister gets, but whenever I have said or done something worth reporting, the media have always covered it. One needs to prove oneself to the people in the long run. If the people accept you, so will the media, if the people reject you, so will the media.

Rumeen Farhana, reserved seat MP nominated by the opposition party BNP also believes that media coverage depends on one’s competence:

If you have knowledge and wisdom, and if you speak for the people, if you are the voice of the people, you will be covered by the media. The media covers what sells, it is as simple as that. I get a lot of coverage, particularly when I say what no one else has said. One needs to be a trendsetter. But if I am quoted with my male counterparts in a news story, even if my words are rich with data and information and the others talk rubbish, my quotes come last. This may have to do with seniority in some cases, but also gender. But when I say something unique that no one else has said, the media are forced to make me the headline.

Media framing and people’s perception and feedback can be very sexist, however. Rumeen Farhana said:

I regularly write columns for several national newspapers. When these are shared online, or when talk shows I appear on are streamed online, there is

no feedback on the content. The comments are all about why I do not cover my head, when I will get married, and outright swearing at me using the most vulgar language. No one points fingers at a man's character, but they do at a woman's, which hinders women from moving forward. If women are to succeed, they must forget about their character and reputation.

Not everyone is as bold in their efforts to prove themselves, however. Singer-politician Momtaz Begum believes that women not only have to work much harder than men in order to succeed, but also to be recognised for their accomplishments. She said:

Male politicians (and celebrities) can approach and interact freely with people, especially other men, including journalists. Women have to think twice before approaching the media themselves, taking into consideration who they will call or meet with, at what time of day, etc. Character, reputation, are all very important for women – if they can overcome such inhibitions, it will be easier for them to achieve their goals and earn publicity for it. My accomplishments are a result of my hard work and dedication, but a man in my place would have seen greater success and much sooner.

As shown above, women who were already professionally well-established faced fewer challenges. For example, Selima Ahmad, founder and president of Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, was already a successful entrepreneur with good rapport with the media when she contested the 2018 elections. Ahmad acknowledges that, along with the fact that she spends a lot of time working in her constituency, making the media responsive to her efforts, her strong family, educational and professional background helped her, without which it would be difficult for most women in politics. “But women also need to make an effort to break gender stereotypes and to promote themselves. They need to be more professional in their public relations activities. I have someone assigned specifically for this. I am also active on social media, which has been amazingly effective in establishing connectivity between me and my constituents.”

The less media savvy, however, tend to remain in the shadows, despite their efforts and accomplishments. Sayeda Zakia Noor, a doctor by profession, and whose father and brother were both renowned political leaders of the Awami League, said that she has no interaction with the media. While the local media cover their MPs regardless of their sex, the national media rarely reach out.

The only time the media ever get in touch with me is on my father's or brother's death anniversaries. My only identity is in relation to my family relationships – no one bothers to ask who I am, what I do. The media has covered the Covid-19 pandemic in depth. Yet, despite my being a doctor and a Member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Health and Family Welfare which has been working actively on countering the pandemic, the media have never approached me about this. Instead, I see my male colleagues who have nothing to do with the subject being randomly interviewed and quoted in the media.

Political women are often featured in the media for reasons other than politics. Actor and politician, Suborna Mustafa, receives more media coverage than her political contemporaries due to her celebrity status, but not in relation to parliamentary affairs. She said:

The press is failing women politicians, even high-profile ones like the Speaker and others who have made great contributions with their work. Reserved seat women parliamentarians in particular are side-lined and this is reflected in their media coverage. Most of these women have risen from the grassroots, have worked hard to establish themselves as politicians and are doing a very good job which people appreciate, but the media do not cover them. The media can profile women politicians, their efforts, accomplishments and impact in their own fields, be it business, health, culture, but we know nothing about these women and their work.

The media give importance to the issues they want to, and they are not interested in women and so give them little coverage, said Masuda M. Rashid Chowdhury, an opposition Jatiya Party MP.

Covering the prime minister and the leader of the opposition is not enough. Women politicians, entrepreneurs and development workers have contributed a lot to women's empowerment, especially in rural areas. Sometimes extraordinarily successful women are given publicity, other very hard-working people are not. Those who are politically highly active and eloquent are covered by the media, but there are also many women MPs from different professions who do not get the same level of coverage. The media must focus on the contributions of women. At the same time, women must also be proactive in terms of engaging with the media.

The political contribution of women has not been sufficiently documented throughout history. Reserved seat woman parliamentarian Aroma Dutta believes this to be true particularly during Bangladesh's independence war of 1971 and beyond, where the role of women has been greatly neglected. She said:

This is because the media was not supportive or gender-sensitive, and so the place of women remains in the dark. There are over one lakh women in local government who are politically active against all odds, they are social and political reformers, but we do not know their stories because the media does not give fair coverage to women. Even with regard to women in parliament, whether elected or selected, they have all been nominated through a political process. The media have a duty to make their stories heard, not frivolous stories but coverage of their work and their achievements. One of the first questions I get from journalists is about why I do not dye my hair. The media focus on women's external beauty, not on their inner qualities.

According to Dutta, the media disregard positive stories about women and focus on the negative. "The media are more unkind towards women than they are to men, especially when women are firm and speak against wrongdoings. Social media is even worse." Dutta said that while she does not usually keep in mind the fact that she is a woman, sometimes she has to. "I have to be cautious about not losing my temper or raising my voice, which may be seen as normal for a man but not a woman. As a woman public representative, I must think about my public image and worth."

Most of the women parliamentarians interviewed, while noting the role of the media in covering women politicians, also acknowledged that the system within which the women function make it difficult for them as well as the media to cover them more substantively. Reserved seat women parliamentarians in particular are undermined by their male counterparts. Aroma Dutta said:

Women MPs need to be empowered and made responsible for political, social and economic development in their constituencies. If women are more proactive, they will also be more visible. Women must be seen in action, and for this, their case studies need to be publicised by the media and the women's own projection of themselves. Empowering female politicians is a policy matter and requires changes in the system, assigning women and men the same roles, responsibilities and stakes so that women are not seen as women but as politicians, as leaders.

The findings of the interviews largely reflect the findings from the analysis of media content. Women in the highest ranks of the political system do not feel their media coverage is gendered. Those newer to the profession, however, often feel marginalised in terms of both the quantity and quality of media coverage, with more attention being paid to their relationships to male mentors/politicians, or their celebrity status in a different field, and often their shortcomings or failures, rather than their political work and success stories. The women parliamentarians suggested that more attention should be paid to the work being done by female politicians through more constructive media coverage. Multiple interviewees also suggested that reserved seat women parliamentarians in particular, who are not seasoned politicians or experienced in parliamentary process and conduct, require professional training which would help them to assert themselves and communicate with greater confidence in parliament and with journalists and the media.

## **Conclusion**

This study has found that women politicians were framed in the Bangladeshi press as “female candidates” apart from the norm, reinforcing the discourse of politics as a male domain, despite the fact that an increasing number of women are actively involved in politics. Trivialisation of women politicians occurred in the context of relating their political existence to a male figure. Women who were politically established and powerful (even though the historical roots of this power may have had a male connection), were found to receive gender-neutral media coverage. Women are treated as less of a novelty than in the media of other countries, possibly due to the fact that women heads of state have ruled the country for the past three decades, and the number of women have increased across levels in the political arena. As such, depending on the individual candidate, competing media discourses both reinforce as well as, to an extent, challenge traditional gender stereotypes. However, research conducted in other contexts shows more in depth, investigative and interpretive stories with more detailed focus on candidates. In the case of the Bangladesh media, most of the stories analysed do not go into such depth. While this may be partly a consequence of less coverage of female candidates, it may also be a result of the journalistic culture, routines and processes in the country which do not allow for very in-depth reporting of political candidates, particularly newcomers, and especially during election season. This study paves the way for future research comparing the framing of male and female politicians in the Bangladeshi media, not only during election time but over longer periods of time.

While the gendered political and social system itself hinders women from joining



and performing better in the political arena, the media also has a role to play in promoting women more positively in politics. Beaudoux (2017) refers to the “rule of reversibility”: ‘if you would not ask it of a man, do not ask it of a woman; if you would not say it about a male candidate, do not use those words about his female counterpart.’ This essentially points to the need for equal media treatment of male and female politicians. In a step further, the media can raise awareness of the presence, strength and efforts of women, covering and evaluating their accomplishments and impact. This would serve to familiarise people with the image of women politicians, demonstrating that they are not exceptions, but, increasingly, the norm in Bangladeshi politics, and encourage the involvement of an even greater number of women in the political process towards a gender-balanced political system and government.

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