

# Role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Women Empowerment: A First Woman-Friendly Statesman in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This article explores the role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a first woman-friendly statesman in Bangladesh. His role has not been investigated in the light of gendered discourse who broke the culture of silence by acknowledging the roles of Bangali women, their heroic and courageous deeds, dedication and huge contribution to Bangali nationalist discourse and political trajectory. Mujib's notion of gender and his perception of women's empowerment has equally not been discovered in academic discourse and political scholarship. He has been regarded as the first woman-friendly statesman in this article for (1) providing critical insight into the traditional narrative of the socio-political history of Bangladesh (2) challenging the stereotypical outlook of the patriarchal society towards Bangali women with the introduction of a new insight and (3) moving for the advancement of the society with women empowerment in a very pragmatic manner.

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## Introduction

The role of women usually remains invisible in the nationalist discourse. Within the patriarchal society, gender segregation is a common phenomenon. Women are considered as inferior to men and are largely excluded from the public realms of cultural production within the patriarchal structure of society (Huda, 2005).

Although mainstream nationalist scholars ignore gender relation in connection with nationalist movements all over the world, Mujib demonstrates his exception in this regard by adopting the feminist approach. Indeed, he paved the way for women's empowerment by acknowledging the courageous role of Bangali women and their direct association with political scholarship, nationalist discourse and home management.

## Methodology

The researcher has reviewed the women empowerment policy of Bangabandhu to comprehend how a new gendered discourse was introduced to ensure equal rights of women and their

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participation in both public and private spheres in his newly created nation state, Bangladesh. In this regard, the author collected secondary data from Bangabandhu's two books, including *Ausamapta Atmajiboni*, *Amar Dekha Naya Chin* published in 2012 and 2020 respectively and his political narratives. In parallel, several research articles, newspapers and relevant Western and Bengali literature have also been examined to procure academic materials to prepare this research article.

### **Nationalism as a gendered phenomenon**

The nationalist phenomenon from the perspective of feminist scholarship is gendered (West; 1997 Makana, 2019). As women remain confined exclusively at their homes with their household activities, their contribution has never been evaluated with great pride and worth in the mainstream nationalist discourses. Feminist nationalism accordingly redefines nationalism by projecting women not only as biological producers, carriers of cultural narrative and cultural capital but also as political organisers, frontliners, guerrilla fighters, prisoners. Despite such diverse and contributive roles, women are often found in their subordinate and marginalised position within nationalist movements. Accordingly, a group of scholars including Yuval-Davis (2000), Anthias (1989), Kandiyoti (1991) have challenged the gender formation of male theories and investigated the active role of women in the process of nation formation.

### **Mujibian notion of Gender**

The author considers Bangabandhu as the first woman friendly statesman of Bangladesh perceive society through a gender lens. As he was aware of the structure of a patriarchal society where women face disparity and inequalities in all spheres of life, gender remains an essential element in his political discourse. According to Mujibian philosophy, a society must be free from all sorts of exploitation by ensuring equal rights for all and meeting the basic needs of both men and women (United News of India, 2020). Indeed, he observed women's subordinate position and vulnerable condition in his own society which had the patriarchal structure. However, in parallel he perceived the empowered condition of women in New China who joined the factory, mills and defense force along with government services. Women's role he conceptualized could not be remained confined exclusively as biological producers. Instead of stereotype patriarchal view he conceptualized the process of development with gendered perspective. Hence, keeping half of population apart from the production processes, he asserted national advancement could not be achieved. Similar rights of men and women and their regular participation in both public and private domains remain as core principles in his development paradigm. Men cannot do injustice he echoed with the feminist scholars to women when they get equal right and status in society. Empowered women are pretty aware about their rights as well as self-confident to combat with all inequalities and disparities of the society (Rahman, 2020, p. 97-101).

## **Framing Gendered Discourse in Mujib Reign**

In the light of aforementioned philosophy Bangabandhu acknowledged the contribution of both men and women in the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and aspired to utilize women's participation at the nation building tasks along with men and laid the ground of women empowerment in multiple ways in his newly created country (Bangla News 24.com, 2016). Indeed, throughout the history of Liberation Movement of Bangladesh, a good number of Bangali women has been found as frontline fighter, medical care-giver, informants and dedicated mother. Although the feminist scholars have reviewed the role of Bangali women both as victims and participants who contributed as political personalities, or guerrilla fighters or became the subject of sexual violence, they had not been regarded and honored as freedom fighters in mainstream Bangali political philosophy, literatures and mass media (Huda, 2008).

It was indeed Mujib who first broke the patriarchal looking glass of the society by making Bangali women visible in the history of anti-Pakistani colonial movement and in the imagination of Bangali nationalist discourse. According to several research findings 2-4 Lacs women were physically assaulted and, tortured by Pakistani army and their local collaborators including Razakars and Al-badars during the period of Liberation War (Daily Tribune, 2020). After the end of struggle movement many of those tortured women had been socially humiliated, became homeless and got alienated (Bashir, 2021). Some others got committed to suicide or remained traumatized and stigmatized due to declination of their intimate family or community to accept them as their fellow members (Hussain, 2020, Mallick, 2020).

By perceiving such vulnerable condition of Bangali women Bangabandhu coined the dignified term Birangana on December 22, 1971 to recognize the tortured ladies as War Heroines. To get rid of them from the traumatic condition and boosted up them psychologically Mujib assumed the role of father with the announcement to write his name as their parent and Dhanmondi 32 to indicate their local address. Simultaneously, he arranged marriages for many of them who then had been regarded as his daughters (Hussain, 2020, Mallick, 2020).

Thus, by shattering the social taboos and stigmas on war victim Bangali women he opened up a new horizon with new insight to pay due respect to War Heroines of Bangladesh (Leaflet, Bangladesh Awami League, 2022). This fact has been narrated in the statement of Birangana Hasna Banu who reveals "after independence we returned to the villages but the village leaders did not accept the Biranganas and their families. -----Later, Bangabandhu kept the Biranganas and their families in a rehabilitated center." (Daily Star, 2007).

Indeed, Mujibian strategy on gender and gender equality was based on inclusive method and multi-dimensional approaches. To bring back the destitute women in the mainstream society (Mallick, 2020) his first attempt was to rehabilitate and empower them in independent Bangladesh. In this regard, he founded "Women Rehabilitation Board" in 1972 with the assistance of eleven eminent Bangali intellectuals and women politicians including Professor

Nilima Ibrahim and Advocate Momtaz Begum. That board was reorganized as “Women’s Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation”, in 1974, under the 1st 5-year plan program (1973-78). “Agro-based Program for the Rural Women (1973)” was also launched by the Women Affairs Department in his regime (Gupta, 2021).

While millions of Bangali women were brutally tortured and became victim of sexual violence during the period of Liberation War, Bangabandhu provided multifaceted action programs for them. Women’s Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation were officially launched with the objectives to provide victim support system, treatment facilities and promote women’s development across the country (Hussain, 2020).

Bangabandhu thus appeared as a woman friendly statesman who intended to reconstruct the society with the notion of gender parity and equal participation of all groups of men and women. By challenging the power of masculinity and the objectification of women body in war politics, he imagined his Bangladesh as such a liberated country where the Biranganas would have the right to live with dignity and honor. Crime against Bangali women including rape, abortion, birth of war baby were then considered not exclusively as the by-product of war (Murthy, 2017) but equally remained as burning issues in nation building project of Bangabandhu. Instead of portraying the Bangali victim women as disempowered and marginalized he wanted to make them assertive, self-dependent and income generator in post-war period.

Accordingly, for their empowerment vocational training, stipend and scholarships in education had been provided. In parallel, several showroom and sales centers were opened to encourage their potentiality and dynamic activity in production procedure and employment. Moreover, day care amenities were extended for the children of those mothers who served as trainer and care giver. The 1st 5-year plan thus was designed in Mujib reign from the gender friendly perspective for ensuring women’s full participation in education, health sectors, and family planning programs (Hussain, 2020).

### **Political Empowerment: Women’s Voice heard in Constitution of 1972**

The gendered nationalist theme of Bangabandhu has been reflected in the Constitution of 1972 in his regime. Article 28(2) of the Constitution asserts that both men and women would have equal rights in all positions of the State and public domain (Shafi, 2004, p.145). By ensuring equal rights and importance of both men and women the Constitution was framed up in the light of the notion of gender parity. It was a historical breakthrough policy, indeed. It requires a paradigm shifting in the consciousness of the patriarchal society which make images of the Bangali women either in the stereotype or marginal fashion or with the discriminatory policy.

Bangabandhu the researcher argues could not be regarded exclusively as a secular political demagogue. He has been discovered equally as a strong believer in gender parity and women empowerment all through his political journey. In his different political narratives and speeches

his party Awami League was imagined as a non-communal, secular as well as gender-friendly organization. Indeed, before getting arrested during the period of Six Points Movement he handed over the charge of General Secretary of Awami League to Amena Begum, a woman politician. Having the patriarchal mind-set objection was raised from the side of some elderly male colleagues who were unwilling to accept the female leadership during the period of political turmoil (Gupta, 2021). While the political domain of the society was closed, parochial and patriarchal, Mujib wanted to bring qualitative change in political frontline. Hence, to make women's voice louder and showcasing their equal participation in political affairs, he emphasized on their leadership opportunity and political empowerment (Chapa, 2021, p;116-117).

Indeed, after the birth of Bangladesh gender equality in politics was felt for the first time in Mujib regime (Rahman, 2019). Despite the existence of androcentric paradigm in political domain, women started participating directly in political affairs to a greater extent (Hussain, 2020). In the article 65.3 of the Constitution of Bangladesh during that time 15 seats were reserved for female members in the national parliament for ten years (Rahman, 2019). Despite having the equal opportunity to participate directly in the election of 300 seats under Article 65(2) of the Constitution, the presence of Bangali female leader was marginal in the first parliamentary election of 1973. Among 980 candidates only 2 women contested in that election (Hussain, 2020).

While the women remained alienated from the mainstream political arena in such a fashion, the provision of reserved seat is regarded as the turning point in history of political empowerment of Bangali women. In parallel, the issue of gender was equally taken into consideration as one of the key principles in the policy of Bangladesh KrishakShramikAwami League) (Rahman, 2019).

### **Socio-Economic and Administrative Empowerment**

By challenging the patriarchal values and narratives Bangali women entered into socio-economic and administrative fields along with political sphere due to gender responsive policies in Mujib reign. Although women voice is seldom heard in decision making process, Bangabandhu made the platform for the first time to include women in the decision-making process and ensure their role in administrative affairs. Accordingly, Principal Begum Badrunnesa in the education ministry and Begum Nurjahan Murshid were recruited in the Cabinet in 1973 and Nilima Ibrahim, an academician was appointed as the Director General of Bangla Academy in 1974 (Gupta, 2021, p;23).

While gender mainstreaming was needed in all sectors to eradicate gender discrimination, Bangabandhu government took several initiatives to represent Bangali women in global political forum with their leadership potentiality, administrative ability and strong voice. Hence, for promoting women's leadership and developing their leadership skills he paved the way for their active participation in the 1st World Women's Congress, held in Mexico in 1975(Hussain, 2020).

Within the closed patriarchal system of Pakistan women were underrepresented and undervalued in financial and economic sectors. The job sector was squeezed for them and they got restricted entrance in government employment. By waiving that restriction Mujib reserved 10% quota for Bangali professional women in government employment after independence and opened all doors of job sectors for them to make economy thrive and vibrant. Under such strategic project, the government of Bangabandhu came forward with new vision to honor the family members of martyred freedom fighters by providing jobs and allowance provisions for their wives and daughters. The earning women get more respect Bangabandhu revealed the fact in feminist tone in their domestic sphere (Leaflet, Bangladesh Awami League,2021).

In post-independent Bangladesh he made primary education compulsory up to class eight, and made free education for girls in order to run the society with the principle of gender parity (Daily Bangladesh, 2018). He considered education as a key catalyst to make women equal to men in the society. To eradicate gender inequality from the society, he endeavored to prohibit the system of dowry. Accordingly, he urged the youth to get married with floral garland to leave dowry system. He formed the first female organization “Mohila Sangha” in Bangladesh and enacted Muslim Registration law in 1974 for their upward mobility (Gupta, 2021, p27).

### **Empowerment of Women in Private Domain**

Gender parity Bangabandhu conceptualized is intimately associated with private sphere, along with public domain and accordingly the structure of the family would be democratic and egalitarian. In his private life, he considered the suggestions of his life partner, Sheikh Fazilatunnesa valuable and worthwhile (Rahman, 2012). The opinions, advices, recommendation of Fazilatunnesa had profound impact on the political trajectory of Bangabandhu. Begum Mujib used to run the Rehabilitation center of Dhanmondi area to co-operate war victim (Gupta, 2021).

Being a critical thinker of existing old values and patriarchal thought, Bangabandhu stood against the practice of early marriage. While taking several action programs to encourage education for girls and women he did not grant permission to the marriage of his elder daughter Sheikh Hasina at her early age. Before completion of graduation, he asserted that this elder daughter would not be allowed to get married (Hussain, 2020).Indeed, he emphasized on the exchange of values and sharing of the opinions with the daughters in decision-making process when the issue of marriage of Sheik Hasina was discussed with his partner (Gupta, 2021, p.31). From private life to public affairs, Bangabandhu thus proved himself as a gender right activist.

### **Challenges and Obstacles**

Despite such political praxis, some of his woman-friendly drives were not above criticism and conflict. The title of Birangana and the marriage through floral garland became the subject of

harsh criticism. Although Bangabandhu coined the term Birangana to honor the rape survivor, the society was not ready to accept them as war heroines both conceptually and practically in post-war period. Whereas Bangali men were glorified with the honor of heroism women found themselves under the shadow of shame or with pity. Accordingly, the term Birangana was used to finger out them as “fallen women” with a negative connotation (Murthy,2017). Simultaneously, the floral garland was not recognized as key ornaments for the program of marriage ceremony in Bangladesh.

Although these challenges and constraints were huge in post-independent Bangladesh, Bangabandhu remained adamant in introducing and implementing his new gendered discourse both at the conceptual and pragmatic level. His role thus has been explored as a pioneer political practitioner who was more advanced in mode of thought and course of action than the existing social thought and philosophy of contemporary period.

## **Conclusion**

To make women visible and independent he fought back against several social odds of the patriarchal society and adopted a newly framed gender paradigm and break-throughing political praxis for attaining socio-economic and political emancipation of the Bangali women. This article has unveiled the role of Bangabandhu as a woman-friendly politician and statesman who has redefined the role and contribution of Bangali women in the Liberation Movement of Bangladesh. He has re-visited the Bangali nationalist discourse with due respect and honor to Bangali women with their narrative of heroism. Instead of representing the stereotype feminine properties including passivity, and marginality Bangabandhu attempted to make the Bangali women assertive, innovative and dynamic in political domain, administrative sector and economic enterprise. For the first time women’s voice was heard in the Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972, made by him.

Bangabandhu was thus emerged as a change maker who attempted to bring a shift in the cognitive framework of Banalis from the paradigm of patriarchy to paradigm of gender. For the implementation of that newly emerged gendered discourse into political praxis he acted as a feminist scholar and pragmatic statesman in the socio-political and historical discourse of Bangladesh.

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