



ADVOCACY MESSAGES

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP

By Development Partners and UN Agencies of the Local Consultative Group on Women's Advancement and Gender Equality (LCG WAGE)

Photo: UN Women/Fahad Kaizer
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CONTEXT:

Bangladesh has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.487, ranking 125 out of 172 countries.¹ In the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Bangladesh ranks 88th in ministerial positions. However, it does not have a ranking in women's parliamentary representation due to the dissolution of parliament in 2024.²

Across society, women in Bangladesh face persistent barriers to leadership: high rates of poverty, limited access to finance, the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and exclusionary institutional norms. These are compounded by a discriminatory political culture, violence against women in leadership positions and a shrinking civic space influenced by rising conservatism. Any act or threat of gender-based violence, including online, that prevents women from exercising their equal right to participate in public affairs, vote and be elected, assemble or access service, has detrimental impacts.

In the 12th National Parliament, which has since been dissolved, women held 70 out of 350 seats (20%). 20 of these women were elected to general (geographic) seats, in addition to the 50 reserved seats for women that are mandated under Section 65 of the Constitution and filled through party nominations. In addition, 33 per cent of local government seats are reserved for women, elected indirectly by other local council members.

Although young women were seen at the forefront of the 2024 anti-discrimination protests, their role in leadership and decision-making remains marginal. In total, only 17 per cent of interim government advisers are women, and among the 11 reform commissions, only the Women's Affairs Reform

99%

of respondents have at least one bias against women and 69% hold bias in political dimensions, such as 'men make better politicians than women do'.

Gender Social Norms Index, 2023

17%

of advisers in the interim government are women.

Cabinet Division, Government of Bangladesh

1

of the 11 reform commissions established by the Interim Government is led by a woman.

0

There are no women in the Consensus Commission.

33%

of local government seats are reserved for women.

Representation of the People Order (1972)

Commission (WARC) is chaired by a woman. Crucially, the important Consensus Commission has no women in its membership.

The electoral environment in the country has in the past also been strained by electoral violence and intimidation, particularly targeting women, minorities and disadvantaged groups, which creates a hostile atmosphere for participation and inclusion. A Gender Analysis (2025) conducted by UN agencies in the aftermath of the civil unrest illustrates a concerning decline in women's active participation and

leadership engagement following the student-led Anti-Discrimination Movement. Among female respondents, 14 per cent reported completely disengaging from leadership roles post anti-discrimination movement, highlighting the impact of systemic challenges that discourage sustained involvement. Additionally, 5 per cent indicated that they planned to step away from leadership in the near future and 38 per cent expressed a gradual decrease in their involvement, reflecting a broader withdrawal of women from leadership and decision-making spaces over time.³

Reforms Under Discussion

The Election Reform Commission (ERC) recommended a bicameral national legislature. The lower house is recommended to have 400 single member constituencies elected using First Past the Post.* 25 per cent, or 100 seats, in the lower house are to be reserved for women using a rotational system. The ERC asserts that electing women to reserved seats, rather than appointing them, will strengthen democratic legitimacy, accountability, and political agency of women representatives.⁴

The ERC further recommended a 100-seat upper house, with 50 seats elected using proportional representation (from national political party lists) and 50 seats allocated to civil society, academics, scientists, human service providers, labour representatives, women's development activists, cultural figures and marginalized groups. The overall composition of the upper house is to have at least 30 per cent women.**

Separately, the Women's Affairs Reform Commission recommends an increase in the number of seats in the national parliament to 600, elected from 300 constituencies where each constituency has both one general seat and one reserved seat

*Candidates who win the highest number of votes are elected.

**However, there is no suggestion on how this is to be achieved given the combination of elected and appointed seats.

for women. The Commission also called for stronger enforcement of special measures by disallowing parties not complying with the women's quota provision (33%) of the Representation of People Order from participating in future elections.⁵ The Local Government Reform Commission has also recommended reserved seats for women at all levels of local government through a rotational system.⁶

The charter of demands developed by women's groups has reiterated the need for women to hold political positions at all levels; to reserve 33 per cent of seats for women in all political parties' committees and decision-making bodies; to ensure adequate capacity development programs for women representatives; to reform electoral laws to ensure fair opportunities for women candidates and to establish mechanisms to prevent and address political violence against women.⁷ They also reiterated the importance of participation of women voters, inclusion of individuals with diverse gender identities in prominent political leadership roles and representation of women in platforms for policy development.⁸

The National Consensus Commission agreed in July 2025 to retain the existing system of 50 reserved parliamentary seats for women, and further agreed that 5 per cent of the total nominees in the next election will be women, with the quota increasing by 5 percentage points in each subsequent one until 33 per cent representation is achieved. It agreed to make necessary amendments to Article 65 (3) of the Constitution. The reserved seat provision would remain until 2043 or be repealed earlier if the 33 per cent target is met.⁹ Women's rights organizations criticized this "charity" quota for excluding genuine female participation in decisions on reserved seats in parliament.¹⁰ The underlying issues that restrict women's equal and meaningful political participation, representation and leadership persist.

Linkages to National and International Frameworks

Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh, National Women Development Policy (2011), Women Affairs Reform Commission Report, Electoral Reform Commission Report, Local Government Reform Commission Report, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40, Beijing+30 National Review Report, Political Declaration of the Commission on the Status of Women 69th Session, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5- Gender Equality, SDG 10- Reduce Inequalities, 16- Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325

KEY MESSAGES:

Gender Parity in Decision-Making Systems

- In line with CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40 (GR40),¹¹ promote equal and meaningful representation of women across all decision-making spaces and encourage the government and political parties to adopt a time-bound roadmap to 50:50 parity between women and men in all their diversity, ensuring equal access to and equal power within decision-making systems.
 - Legally recognize intersecting forms of discrimination and their compounded negative impact on women.
 - Adopt and pursue policies and programmes to ensure there is neither direct nor indirect discrimination against women and integrate an intersectional gender perspective in all areas and levels of decision-making, representing women in all their diversity, in accordance with general recommendation No. 25¹² and No 28.¹³

- Adopt special measures, including gender quotas, targeted recruitment, targeted funding, leadership development programmes and career progression pathways, to address structural barriers and accelerate women’s representation in sectors where they remain underrepresented or disadvantaged.
- Consider establishing specific enforcement and sanction mechanisms for non-compliance.
- Support an inter-party women’s network.

Gender-Responsive Electoral and Political Reforms

- Encourage alignment with international frameworks, such as CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to ensure that gender equality is systemically embedded in all institutional and electoral reforms.
- Encourage stakeholders to coalesce around one model of special measure that can meet the parity goal of CEDAW GR40.
- Promote inclusive, cross-party and multi-stakeholder collaboration, including CSOs, women’s rights groups, the private sector and academia, to build consensus and institutionalize gender-responsive reforms beyond political cycles.
- Establish and strengthen support mechanisms that protect civic space and amplify women’s voices, particularly those of feminist and youth-led organisations, to shape, monitor and hold institutions accountable for implementation of gender-responsive reforms.
- Ensure equal rights, responsibilities and access to decision-making processes for elected women representatives, irrespective of the election modality.
- Address discriminatory practices against women in politics at all levels, including local government.
- Urge political parties to promote women’s equal and inclusive participation, including as candidates in elections.
- Ensure women candidates have access to political finance by setting clear rules for candidate nomination and selection, publicly financing women aspirants and candidates through party coffers and publicly available funds.
- Design targeted interventions to ensure women’s participation in electoral processes including gender-sensitive voter outreach, women-only registration centres or queues, providing information on the requirements to enrol and gender training for registration staff.

Violence and Intimidation against Women in Politics

- Adopt a comprehensive approach for the prevention of and response to violence against women in politics (VAWP), including during elections.
 - Adopt relevant legislation and policies to ensure zero-tolerance to intimidation, sexual harassment and any other form of gender-based violence against women.
 - Make resources available to promote and enable women’s full participation and leadership in political and public spheres.
 - Ensure coordination between governmental sectors in the areas of justice and social protection.
- Take concrete steps to remedy all acts of violence against women in politics, including sexual harassment and online trolling, and deliberate attempts to discourage or exclude women candidates from political and electoral processes, recognizing its adverse impact on the fulfilment of women’s and girls’ rights, including the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
 - Urge political parties or candidates to refrain from inciting violence, exercising acts of intimidation or engaging in violent acts.
 - Fully investigate allegations and acts of VAWP to ensure that women can fully, equally and safely exercise their rights to participate in politics and in public life.
 - Collect systematic data on violence and serious threats committed against women in politics and its impact on their levels of political participation.
- Affirm that dismantling gender stereotypes, including their perpetuation and exacerbation through media portrayals, gender-based discrimination in digital and analogue spaces and misinterpretations of religion and culture, is essential to women’s equal access to decision-making.

¹ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2025, data from 2023. A value closer to 0 indicates more equality.*

² World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2025*

³ UN Women, *Gender Analysis (July-December 2024): Impact of the Civil Unrest on Women and Marginalised Groups*

⁴ *Report of Electoral Reforms Commission (2025)*

⁵ *Report of Women’s Affairs Reform Commission (2025)*

⁶ *Report of Local Government Reform Commission Report (2025)*

⁷ Nari Pokkho (2024), *Emancipation, Equality and Justice! Charter of Demands of the Feminist Movement in Bangladesh*

⁸ Bangladesh Mahila Parishad & Bonhishikha - *unlearn gender (2025), Charter of Demand: Strengthening Intergenerational and Inclusive Women’s Movement in Bangladesh*

⁹ Md. Abbas (2025), *The Daily Star, Consensus talks: Deal reached on women’s JS seats*

¹⁰ *The Daily Star (2025), Activists decry ‘charity’ quota for women in JS*

¹¹ CEDAW (2024), *General recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems*

¹² CEDAW (2004), *General recommendation No. 25: Article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention (temporary special measures)*

¹³ CEDAW (2010), *General recommendation No. 28 on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*