

Impact of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on Women's Empowerment: Perspective Bangladesh

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: women empowerment, gender equality, political leadership, development.

Received : 20, January

Revised : 13, February

Accepted: 27, February

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the pivotal role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in promoting women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Bangabandhu's leadership and commitment to fairness led to significant advancements in gender equality through strategic policies, educational reforms, and legal changes. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and qualitative data, the study examines Bangabandhu's impact on women's participation in politics, workforce, and societal development. Despite challenges and criticisms, Rahman's visionary approach reshaped societal attitudes towards women, laying the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable future. This article sheds light on Rahman's enduring legacy as a champion of women's rights, highlighting his transformative contributions to Bangladesh's socio-political landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led Bangladesh to independence, made a big impact on boosting women's rights in the country. He strongly supported making sure women had more power and opportunities. Rahman's actions helped improve women's role in Bangladesh's development. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership and strong commitment to fairness played a vital role in promoting gender equality in Bangladesh. Recognizing the importance of women's participation in sustainable development, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman implemented strategic policies, educational reforms, and legal changes to break down barriers hindering women's progress. His visionary actions not only reshaped societal attitudes towards women but also laid the groundwork for a more equitable future. This introduction sets the stage for an examination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's enduring impact on women's empowerment in Bangladesh, highlighting his pivotal role in driving progress and fostering a more inclusive society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To empower someone is to grant them authority and power. There are several definitions and works of literature on empowerment from this standpoint. Empowerment is the process of increasing a person's ability to make important life decisions, particularly in situations where they have previously been denied this ability (Kabeer, 2005).

In Uganda and Guatemala, women defined empowerment as the ability to enhance their personal well-being, whether through economic means or achieving a sense of self-reliance. They viewed empowerment as having the agency to pursue their goals independently, achieve parity with men, and reduce dependence on others (Alkire and Foster, 2009).

Empowerment is defined as the capacity of a group or individual to make impactful decisions, meaning the ability to make choices and then to translate those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002).

Empowerment has been utilized to speak to a wide scope of ideas and empowerment characterized as the upgrade of resources and abilities of assorted people and gatherings to draw in, impact and consider responsible the organizations which influence them (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002; Kabeer, 2005).

The process of empowerment is not always straightforward and may not be immediately evident. Empowerment entails both rights and responsibilities, and it may result in certain opportunities being diminished (Mahmud, Shah and Becker, 2012).

Empowerment is not a stagnant concept; rather, it is an ongoing process of continuous improvement within the socio-economic environment (Reza, 2018).

Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process that enables women to realize their full identity and potential in all aspects of life. It involves the acquisition of power, which must be exercised, maintained, and preserved once attained. A bundle of research has been done on various issues partially

but till now no work has been done on impact of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on women's empowerment in Bangladesh. So, this is a complete research gap.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, integrating a thorough literature review with primary and secondary data collection. It aims to investigate the impact of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's policies on women's empowerment. Ultimately, this research seeks to deepen understanding of Bangabandhu's role in promoting gender equality and socio-political development in Bangladesh. The research paper goes through arguments and counter arguments process to make its credibility crystal clear it follows APA 7th manual recognizing others' articles, journals, research books at the end in the reference section.

DISCUSSION

The response to the women's awakening in Bengal in the late 19th century was generally centered around education. Besides, women became aware of their rights by participating in the anti-British freedom movement. The participation of women in language movement, popular uprising of 1969 and independence movement during Pakistan period was significant. After a bloody war led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1971, Bangladesh gained its long-awaited independence. Along with men, women also contributed immensely in this liberation war.

Women fought on the front lines of the Liberation War in 1971, providing medical attention to wounded fighters, providing the combatants with intelligence, and sending their men into battle. Furthermore, they had been subjected to rapes and acts of repression by the armed forces of Pakistan and their local allies. So, Bangabandhu termed the victims as 'Birangana' in 1972 and ensured all state facilities to help the women who suffered social prejudices due to being rape victims. He also formed 'Women Rehabilitation Board' in 1972 with 11 renowned teachers and women politicians, including Professor Nilima Ibrahim and Advocate Momtaz Begum for rehabilitating the victims and their war children. He also launched jobs and stipends for the wives and daughters of the martyred freedom fighters. As it is said:

In 1971, women joined the Liberation War by fighting in the frontline, giving medical cares to the injured freedom fighters, giving the freedom fighters various information and sending their men to the war. In addition, they had been the victims of rapes and repressions by the Pakistani military forces and their local collaborators. So, Bangabandhu termed the victims as 'Birangana' in 1972 and ensured all state facilities to help the women who suffered social prejudices due to being rape victims. He also formed 'Women Rehabilitation Board' in 1972 with 11 renowned

teachers and women politicians, including Professor Nilima Ibrahim and Advocate Momtaz Begum for rehabilitating the victims and their war children. He also launched jobs and stipends for the wives and daughters of the martyred freedom fighters. The Constitution, Bangabandhu gave to the nation in 1972, also ensures the equal rights of both men and women. Article 27 of the Constitution stipulates: "All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law." Also, Article 28 (1) says, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth," and Article 28 (2) says, "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and public life." (Bangladesh Awami League, 2021)

Building on the aforementioned ideas, Bangabandhu acknowledged the crucial roles played by men and women in the Bangladesh Liberation War. By taking a number of steps in the recently formed country, he hoped to empower women and encourage their participation in nation-building alongside males. According to Mujibian philosophy, a society should be free from all types of exploitation by ensuring that everyone has equal rights and meeting the needs of both sexes.



Figure 1. Major Contribution of Bangabandhu for women empowerment 1971-1975 (2021).

In addition, Bangaandhu recognized the empowered status of women in New China who actively participated in factories, mills, defense forces, and government services. He reimagined women's roles beyond mere biological reproduction, rejecting traditional patriarchal norms. Instead, he envisioned development through a gendered lens, emphasizing the importance of including women in all facets of society. He argued that excluding half of the population from productive processes hindered national progress. Upholding equal rights and participation for both men and women in both public and private spheres became fundamental principles in his development framework. He echoed feminist scholars in asserting that men cannot commit injustices when women have equal rights and status in society. Empowered women, he believed, are well-informed about their rights and possess the self-confidence to confront societal inequalities and disparities. As he says, To tell the truth, if half the population of a nation sits in the corner of the house and does nothing but breeding, then that nation can never grow in the world (Rahman, 2020, p. 99).

After the establishment of equal rights of men and women, the impossible oppression of girls has stopped in China today. In all the factories, factories, government offices I visited, I found girls working; Their number is more than 40 percent in some places. The main reason for the development of modern China is that men and women have come forward equally in the work of the country. Equally responsive to nation building work. So the nation is progressing towards progress today (Rahman, 2020, p. 101).

Bangabandhu ensured gender equality across all sectors of society. The 1972 Constitution explicitly called for measures to promote women's participation in public life (Article 28). Recognizing the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by women, it initially reserved 15 parliamentary seats for women for a period of 10 years (Article 65.3), a provision later expanded to 50 seats through the 15th Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh. Bangabandhu advocated that empowered women possess greater awareness and self-assurance, enabling them to combat various forms of inequality in all spheres of life (Hussain, 2020).

In 1973, Bangabandhu took significant steps to empower women in politics by appointing two female members to his cabinet: Principal Begum Badrunnesa Ahmed in the education ministry and Begum Nurjahan Murshid in social welfare. These appointments marked a notable move towards promoting women's leadership within the government. Furthermore, to foster women's representation in politics, 15 women were designated as Members of Parliament (MPs) through reserved seats, as outlined in Article 65 (3) of the Constitution. This provision ensured a platform for women to actively engage in legislative processes and decision-making at the highest level of governance.

Moreover, Article 65 (2) of the Constitution provided an additional avenue for women's political participation by allowing them to contest elections directly in 300 parliamentary seats. This provision expanded opportunities for women to engage in the electoral process beyond the reserved seats, facilitating their direct involvement in shaping the political landscape of the country. Bangabandhu's initiatives underscored a commitment to advancing gender equality and promoting women's leadership roles in the political arena, thus contributing to a more inclusive and representative democracy in Bangladesh. As we find in Bangladesh Awami League's website:

While empowering women in politics, Bangabandhu, in 1973, added two female members in the cabinet - Principal Begum Badrunnesa Ahmed in the education ministry and Begum Nurjahan Murshid in social welfare. For promoting women leadership in politics, 15 women were made the Members of the Parliament (MPs) in reserved seats while article 65 (3) in the Constitution also ensures reserved seats for women in the parliament. In addition to reserved seats, women can directly participate in the elections in 300 seats under Article 65 (2) of the Constitution. (2021)

Since the Liberation War, Bangladesh has witnessed a notable surge in women's participation in politics, particularly exemplified by the significant milestone of the 1973 local government elections. For the first time in history, women were statutorily represented at the Union Parishad level, a move championed by Bangabandhu, signifying a ground-breaking step towards integrating women into the development process and granting them administrative empowerment and decision-making roles. Bangabandhu's administration implemented various measures to bolster women's participation across sectors, including lifting restrictions on female government employment and reserving a 10 per cent quota for women, fostering gender inclusivity. Furthermore, Bangabandhu's commitment to women's empowerment was evident through his appointment of two women to his cabinet in 1973 and a woman as the Director-General of Bangla Academy in 1974, marking historic milestones in Bangladesh's political landscape. These initiatives not only expanded women's opportunities in politics and government but also underscored a broader societal shift towards gender inclusivity and empowerment, with Bangabandhu's visionary leadership laying the foundation for greater gender equality in Bangladesh, setting a precedent for future generations. As Hussain (2020) says:

Bangabandhu had taken the maiden step in streamlining women with development i.e. administrative empowerment and inclusion of women in decision making roles. The restrictions on females in government employment were waived and a 10 per cent quota was reserved for them opening their participation in all areas of

employment. Two women were included in the Cabinet in 1973 and one woman was appointed DG of Bangla Academy in 1974.

Since independence, women in Bangladesh have made significant contributions to the economy, playing a pivotal role in increasing GDP and driving the country's economic development. Traditionally, women's roles in society were confined to the domestic sphere, primarily responsible for household chores, childcare, and caring for extended family members. However, over the past four decades, this perception has been challenged as more women enter the labor market and participate in political, policy, and social spheres. While the traditional view emphasized women's roles as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law, their increasing presence in various sectors has diversified their contributions to society (Hossain, 2017).

In rural areas, women play a central role in agricultural production, traditionally engaging in tasks such as seed selection, crop storage, and household produce production, as well as caring for domestic livestock. However, social norms and customs often confine women to the immediate household area, limiting their mobility and, consequently, their labor market opportunities. As a result, women typically do not take their produce to market or interact publicly with men, relying instead on male family members or middlemen for the sale of their products (Kalam & Al Amin, 2016).

Despite persisting obstacles, the status of women in Bangladesh has shown significant improvement over the past 40 years. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2008, the women's workforce increased from 5.4 million in 1995-96 to 12.1 million in 2005-06. Of the total workforce, 80.8 percent of women are engaged in family work. In the 40-49 age group, women's workforce participation peaked at 35.1 percent (Khan, Rahman & Kabir, 2014).

Despite his efforts to promote gender equality, some of Bangabandhu's initiatives faced criticism and encountered conflicts. One such example is the title of "Birangana" and the practice of marriage through floral garlands, both of which sparked controversy. While Bangabandhu intended to honor rape survivors by coining the term "Birangana," society was not prepared to accept them as war heroines, leading to conceptual and practical challenges in the post-war period. Instead of being celebrated as heroes, Bangladeshi women were often stigmatized and pitied, with the term "Birangana" carrying negative connotations, labeling them as "fallen women."

Similarly, the tradition of marriage through floral garlands was not widely recognized as a customary practice in Bangladesh. Despite these significant challenges and constraints in post-independence Bangladesh, Bangabandhu remained resolute in introducing and implementing his new gendered discourse, both conceptually and practically. His unwavering

commitment to advancing gender equality positioned him as a pioneering political figure who surpassed the prevailing social norms and philosophies of his time. Bangabandhu's forward-thinking approach and decisive actions demonstrate his leadership in advocating for women's rights and challenging societal norms, ultimately paving the way for progress towards gender equality in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, through his transformative leadership, challenged entrenched social norms and patriarchal structures in Bangladesh, pioneering political strategies to empower Bangladeshi women. This article sheds light on Bangabandhu's role as a staunch advocate of women's rights, reshaping their significance within the country's Liberation Movement. Departing from traditional stereotypes, Bangabandhu aimed to portray Bangali women as assertive, innovative, and dynamic actors across political, administrative, and economic domains. Notably, his leadership ensured the inclusion of women's voices in the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh, marking a historic milestone in their socio-political emancipation. Throughout the Liberation War, women's multifaceted involvement significantly contributed to the advancement of their political rights, as evidenced by their diverse roles in providing support to freedom fighters and influencing international opinion. Bangabandhu's efforts to elevate women's status reflected his commitment to shifting the cognitive framework of Bangladeshis towards a more gender-inclusive paradigm, making him both a feminist scholar and a pragmatic statesman within the socio-political and historical context of Bangladesh.

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