

VISIBLE BUT SIDELINED: WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND REPRESENTATION IN POST- REVOLUTION BANGLADESH

ARZU TASNINE ANNA



Editors: Homa Hoodfar

First Edition: 2026

Copyright © Women Living Under Muslim Laws

All rights reserved.

Part of this book may be quoted or used if the author and publisher are acknowledged.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted for commercial purposes without prior written permission from the copyright owner.

Published by:

Women Living Under Muslim Laws

London, UK

wluml@wluml.org

www.wluml.org

Cover Page Credits: New Age

ISBN: 978-1-907024-25-2

Kindle: 978-1-907024-26-9

**Women Transforming Politics: Gender and Political
Leadership Series**

**Visible but Sidelined: Women, Violence, And
Representation in Post-Revolution
Bangladesh**

By Arzu Tasmine Anna

Visible but Sidelined: Women, Violence, and Representation in Post-Revolution Bangladesh

Abstract:

This paper analyses the post-Monsoon Revolution political settlement in Bangladesh by tracing how women's central role in the 2024 July uprising was followed by their systematic exclusion from formal politics. Drawing on election data, media reporting, and feminist-rights advocacy, it argues that the 2026 parliamentary polls, producing the lowest share of women MPs since independence, reveal not a temporary setback but a deliberate political order that tolerates gendered violence, preserves unequal family laws, and treats women's representation as expendable. The article tracks women's mobilization during the revolution, the backlash of everyday and digital violence after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's regime, and the marginalization of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission's 423 reform proposals, including calls for 100 directly elected women's seats and binding parity quotas. It then links these dynamics to Bangladesh's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), showing how the persistence of reservations to Articles 2 and 16 and the failure to implement binding electoral quotas and robust protections against online and offline gender-based violence undermine the democratic legitimacy of the "new Bangladesh." The paper concludes by outlining concrete political demands, CEDAW-consistent family-law reform, the democratization of reserved seats, legally binding gender-parity rules, and institutionalized feminist participation in constitutional reform, that would place women's lives, rights, and leadership at the center of the country's democratic refounding rather than at its margins.

Visible but Sidelined: Women, Violence, and Representation in Post-Revolution Bangladesh

On 12 February 2026, Bangladeshis went to the polls for the first national election after the Monsoon Revolution that toppled Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian government. Women were central to that uprising: they marched, organized, cared for the injured, and faced state violence in the streets (Chowdhury, 2025). Yet in the first parliament of "new Bangladesh," only seven women sit among 300 directly elected MPs, a 25-year low in women's participation and the lowest share since independence in 1972, even compared with the previous legal framework (Deutsche Welle, 2026; The Daily Star, 2026a).

This post-election intervention argues that the exclusion of women from formal politics is not a temporary anomaly but the product of a political settlement that tolerates violence against women, preserves unequal family laws, and treats women's representation as expendable. In this sense, the paper approaches the post-revolution political order by highlighting how gendered violence, legal inequality, and political exclusion reinforce one another. It traces a sequence in few steps. First, women actively participated in, and often helped lead the Monsoon Revolution, animated by hopes for a more democratic and socially just society (Chowdhury, 2025). Second, once the regime fell, women were gradually pushed back and exposed to renewed forms of exclusion and violence, including online attacks during the election (iKNOW Politics, 2026; United Nations, 2025). Third, the Women's Affairs Reform Commission (WARC) responded with 423 ambitious proposals: adding 100 directly elected women's seats (corresponding to Bangladesh's increased population of over 170 million and designed to give voice to women outside urban elites), strengthening laws against violence, reforming family law and inheritance rights, and recognizing rape within marriage, which destroys women's intrinsic dignity, as a crime (BRAC Institute of Governance and Development [BIGD], 2026; The Business Standard, 2026). Fourth, the 2026 election and the parties' failure to honor the July National Charter, which was already very weak on women's political representation, reveal how little of this agenda made it into the new political order (The Business Standard, 2026; The Daily Star, 2026b).¹

¹ The July Charter of Bangladesh, developed in the wake of the July revolution, proposes a framework for democratic and constitutional restructuring, enhanced accountability, expanded citizens' rights, and more inclusive political representation.

Bangladesh ratified Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, committing under Article 7 to take all appropriate measures, including quotas, to ensure women's substantive equality and political representation (CEDAW Committee, 2017). The CEDAW Committee, 23 independent experts elected by UN states parties, monitors compliance through periodic state reports and issues authoritative guidance like General Recommendation 35 on gender-based violence as discrimination (CEDAW Committee, 2017). Unless Bangladesh withdraws its reservations to Articles 2 (comprehensive anti-discrimination) and 16(1)(c) (marriage equality), implements binding electoral quotas, and takes serious action against online/offline gender-based violence, the revolution's promise of women's political inclusion will remain fundamentally incomplete.



Source: Daily Star (Independent candidate from Brahmanbaria-2 seat and expelled BNP leader, Rumeen Farhana)

I. Women in the Monsoon Revolution: Participation and Hope

The Monsoon Revolution began in July 2024 as protests against the restoration of a public-sector job quota system but rapidly escalated into a nationwide uprising against an increasingly authoritarian regime (Chowdhury, 2025). As Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury shows, student activists from Students Against Discrimination, joined by teachers, workers, and ordinary citizens, transformed grievances over jobs into a broader challenge to Sheikh Hasina's rule

(Chowdhury, 2025). Women were present at every stage of this process. They organized logistics, distributed water and food, staffed first-aid points, documented abuses on their phones, and joined processions that defied curfews and “shoot-on-sight” orders (Chowdhury, 2025).

For many women, participation in the uprising was not simply about regime change; it was about the possibility of living in a polity where violence and impunity would no longer structure everyday life (Chowdhury, 2025). Years of shrinking civic space, digital surveillance, and police impunity had left women activists acutely aware of the costs of dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The streets briefly offered an alternative: a space in which young women and men marched together, chanted “razakar, razakar” to reclaim an insult, and dared to imagine a “Bangladesh 2.0” (Asia Pacific Foundation, 2026).

These experiences created specific expectations. Women who had organized blockades and negotiated with police officers assumed that they would have some claim on the new political order: not only in symbolic terms, but through concrete changes in law, policy, and representation. The post-election reality reveals how quickly those expectations were disappointed.



Source: *The Diplomat*

II. After the Uprising: Backlash, Everyday Violence, and Digital Attacks

The fall of Hasina did not break the continuum of violence that structures women's lives. Bangladesh's 2024 Violence Against Women Survey, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA, shows that roughly 70 percent of ever-married women have experienced some form of intimate partner violence, and nearly half reported such violence in the previous year (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNFPA, 2025). More than half reported physical abuse, about a third reported sexual violence, and more than 80 percent described controlling behaviors, including restrictions on movement and denial of access to household money (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNFPA, 2025). These are not "private" matters; they determine whether a woman can attend a meeting, join a rally, or consider running as a candidate.

Deepfakes against journalists

Several women journalists who criticized parties' failure to nominate women discovered AI-generated sexualized videos of themselves circulating on WhatsApp and TikTok. Platforms were slow and inconsistent in removing the content. Rights groups noted that these attacks echoed earlier waves of digital abuse against women activists during the 2024 protests, suggesting that image-based abuse and deepfakes are becoming normalized tools of political silencing.

State and public violence also persisted. Human Rights Watch documented that women protesters, journalists, and perceived supporters of the opposition were beaten, subjected to sexualized insults, arbitrarily detained, or threatened with "crossfire" during and after the Monsoon Revolution (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Attacks on religious minorities, including Hindu and Ahmadi communities, continued into the election period; women from these groups often bore the brunt of sexual and economic violence (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Digital spaces became a new front line. In the run-up to the 2026 election, reports in Bangladeshi and regional media described coordinated campaigns of cyber-abuse, sexualized trolling, and deepfakes targeting women candidates (United Nations, 2025). Artificial-intelligence tools were used to superimpose women politicians' faces onto pornographic images and videos; Facebook and TikTok were flooded with abusive comments and threats of sexual violence (iKNOW Politics, 2026). Adding to this hostile climate, Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami explicitly stated that women

are barred from top leadership roles based on Islamic principles and fielded no women candidates at all, rhetoric that, regardless of intention, emboldened patterns of online harassment against women in politics (National Herald India, 2026; Reuters, 2026). Analysts and women's rights groups correctly identified these attacks as forms of gender-based violence whose aim was to intimidate women into withdrawing from public life (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, 2025).

The state's response was inconsistent and often inadequate. Some women candidates lodged complaints with cybercrime units and the Election Commission, but they reported that cases were slow to register and platforms were not pressured to remove harmful content promptly (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, 2025). Officials sometimes advised women to "stay off social media" until after the election rather than treat the attacks as violations of their rights (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, 2025). In a society where a woman's "honor" is closely tied to family reputation, the threat of reputational harm has tangible costs: family members may pressure women to abandon campaigns, and parties may hesitate to nominate women perceived as "controversial."

"Close your accounts and stay quiet"

A young first-time woman candidate in Sylhet found doctored images of herself in "compromising" scenes circulating on Facebook, alongside accusations that she was a foreign agent. Anonymous posts threatened that she would be "taught a lesson" if she campaigned door-to-door. When she approached the local cybercrime unit, officers advised her to stay off social media until after the election rather than file a case. The message was clear: Safety would come from her withdrawal from public space, not proactive state protection.

This persistence of domestic, public, and digital violence reveals a simple fact: the new order relies on women's labor and loyalty but does not guarantee their safety or equal political voice. Gender-based violence has direct implications for women's political participation. Feminist scholars and activists in Bangladesh have long argued that the absence of women from parliament limits the state's willingness to adopt stronger legal protections against violence, whether domestic abuse, workplace harassment, technology-facilitated abuse, or discriminatory family laws (BIGD, 2026). When women hold decision-making power, they are more likely to

push for legislation addressing these issues. In this sense, political representation is not merely symbolic: it directly shapes the legal and institutional protections available to women.

III. The Women's Affairs Reform Commission: Feminist Response and Political Backlash

Mandate and vision

The Women's Affairs Reform Commission (WARC) was established by the interim government in late 2024 with a mandate to review laws and policies affecting women and propose reforms consistent with Bangladesh's international human rights obligations, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (BIGD, 2026; The Business Standard, 2026). Over more than a year of work, WARC developed 423 recommendations across fifteen thematic areas, including violence against women and children, labor rights, health, political participation, and family law (BIGD, 2026).

Central to its proposals was a recognition that violence, unequal family laws, and political exclusion form a mutually reinforcing system. WARC recommended adding 100 new seats for women in the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) to be filled through direct election as a step toward substantive parity, strengthening laws on gender-based violence, and reforming personal laws to reduce gender discrimination in marriage, divorce, guardianship, and inheritance, including recognizing rape within marriage as a crime (BIGD, 2026; The Business Standard, 2026). The proposal to expand women's parliamentary representation was closely linked to the commission's broader agenda on violence and legal reform, since commissioners argued that stronger female representation would make it more likely that legislation addressing gender-based violence and discriminatory personal laws would be adopted. Taken together, these proposals offered a structural approach: they treated violence in the home, on the street, and in digital spaces, as well as women's exclusion from parliament, as manifestations of the same underlying inequality.



Source: Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS)

Sidelining and “intentional inaction”

Yet WARC’s trajectory illustrates how limited the political space for such reforms proved to be. Procedurally, the commission was treated like many commissions before it. It was asked to submit its report and then step back from the formal process. The Cabinet Division initially identified seventy-one recommendations for follow-up, but the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs reduced this to just thirteen in the final months before the election, effectively shelving the broader agenda (BIGD, 2026). No independent monitoring mechanism was created, and there was no assurance that the incoming parliament would act on the proposals (BIGD, 2026).

The political backlash was intense. Hardline religious organizations, segments of conservative media, and some politicians branded WARC the “prostitute commission” and denounced it as foreign-driven, anti-Islamic, and anti-Bangladeshi (Human Rights Watch, 2025; The Business Standard, 2026). Human Rights Watch documented threats and smear campaigns against commissioners and women’s rights activists, including calls for public shaming and violence

(Human Rights Watch, 2025). This rhetoric created moral panic and made it costly for officials to defend the commission.

The interim government, despite having advisers who personally supported gender equality, largely remained silent. Researchers at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), drawing on interviews with commissioners and activists, report that women's rights advocates repeatedly described this silence as "intentional inaction" rather than bureaucratic inertia (BIGD, 2026). In their view, key decision-makers chose not to expend political capital on defending WARC at a time when conservative forces were mobilizing against it. The National Consensus Commission, the primary forum for debating constitutional and political reform, remained overwhelmingly male and largely inattentive to gender; WARC was effectively excluded from its deliberations despite seeking to engage (BIGD, 2026).

The result was that the most comprehensive feminist response to the post-revolution moment was marginalized before the first post-Monsoon election took place. To see the consequences, one must turn to the July National Charter and the 2026 polls.

IV. The July National Charter and the Election: The 5 Percent That Never Came

What the July Charter promised

The July National Charter 2025, negotiated by the National Consensus Commission and endorsed by major parties and civic actors, laid out principles for Bangladesh's transition (The Business Standard, 2026). On women's representation, it retained the existing fifty reserved seats, which are distributed indirectly through political parties according to their parliamentary share and have long been criticized by the women's movement for producing MPs who are accountable to party leadership rather than to women themselves. It then added an important political commitment: parties would be "called upon" to nominate women in at least 5 percent of the 300 directly elected seats in the next election, and to increase that share by five percentage points in subsequent elections until women reached 33 percent of nominees (The Business Standard, 2026). The logic was clear: combining reserved seats with progressive increases in women's direct participation would gradually normalize women's presence in parliament.

Women's and feminist organizations welcomed the language but also expressed concern that the commitment was not legally binding (The Business Standard, 2026). Many groups, drawing on decades of advocacy, reiterated their demand that all women's seats be directly elected and that the system of indirectly elected reserved seats, controlled by party leadership, be replaced or fundamentally reformed (Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, 2025; iKNOW Politics, 2026). A previous attempt to move toward fully elected women's seats had been struck down by the courts on procedural grounds, reinforcing the perception that the legal system was reluctant to disrupt the status quo (BIGD, 2026).

How parties dodged the commitment

In practice, the July Charter's 5 percent promise remained largely on paper. Election-commission data and media analyses show that of 2,768 candidates contesting the 13th parliamentary election, only around 3.9–4 percent were women, the lowest share of women candidates in 25 years (The Daily Star, 2026a; The Financial Express, 2026). Women's rights groups estimate that women received an average of just 3.98 percent of party nominations, far below the 5 percent pledge and dramatically below the 33–50 percent targets demanded by feminist organizations (The Daily Star, 2026a). According to The Daily Star and follow-up reporting summarized by iKNOW Politics, more than thirty of the fifty-one registered parties² nominated no women at all, including Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Andolon Bangladesh (iKNOW Politics, 2026; The Daily Star, 2026a).

An analysis titled “The 5% that never came” notes that among the parties that signed the July Charter, only a minority reached or exceeded the 5 percent threshold (Dhaka Tribune, 2026). The BNP nominated the largest absolute number of women but still fell short of the agreed benchmark, allocating only ten of its 328 nominations to women (Dhaka Tribune, 2026).

²Bangladesh has fifty-one registered political parties, though only a small number have historically secured parliamentary representation. In the 2026 election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) emerged as the dominant governing party, while Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party (NCP) became the primary opposition forces. Many smaller parties contested the election but failed to win seats

Civil-society monitoring found that only around twenty parties met the 5 percent target, many of them small leftist or regional parties; the major electoral contenders did not (Dhaka Tribune, 2026).

The Election Commission did not sanction non-compliant parties or publicly shame them for failing to meet the commitment. The Charter's language, "called upon to nominate", was too weak to create enforceable obligations (The Business Standard, 2026). By contrast, WARC's recommendation to create 100 directly elected women's seats, and to embed gender-parity objectives in electoral law. The proposal to add 100 directly elected seats for women sought to ease male resistance to electoral competition while also acknowledging that Bangladesh's population has doubled since independence, making such an expansion entirely reasonable. Yet it was firmly rejected by political parties, entrenched elites, and coalitions of Islamic and conservative forces, who viewed it as a threat to existing power structures. Had it been accepted, it would have created a more robust system of representation and moved Bangladesh closer to meeting its CEDAW commitments. That recommendation was never implemented (Hoodfar 2025, BIGD, 2026).

Record-low representation in Election

The results are predictable, and damning. Despite women comprising nearly half of Bangladesh's population and playing a visible role in the streets during the Monsoon Revolution, only seven women have won seats among the 300 directly elected Members of Parliament (six from BNP and one ex-BNP independent) (Deutsche Welle, 2026; National Herald, 2026). Out of 78 women who contested on the election only 17 women who ran outside party lines, were able to contest as independents, and most faced severe disadvantages because they lacked financial backing, party infrastructure, and the political connections that are often essential for electoral success. (The Daily Star, 2026.) This represents a sharp drop from the 6–7 percent of direct wins recorded between 2014 and 2024 to just 2.3 percent, the lowest level since independence (Deutsche Welle, 2026). Women's nominations also remained extremely limited. As mentioned above, on average, women made up only 3.98 percent of all candidates, around 109 out of 2,768. Among those nominated, only about 8 percent were successful, while Jamaat-e-Islami did not nominate any women candidates (The Daily Star, 2026a; The Financial Express, 2026).

On International Women's Day 2026, activists speaking at Naripokkho's event at Manik Mia Avenue described the situation as a "sharp decline" (The Daily Star, 2026a). At another dialogue jointly organized by ActionAid Bangladesh and Prothom Alo, participants characterized the 13th parliamentary election as a 25-year low in women's participation (The Financial Express, 2026). For the first time since 2001, when women's nominations stood at 1.8 percent, the share of women candidates has again fallen below 4 percent (Deutsche Welle, 2026; The Financial Express, 2026). Speakers described this as a "serious warning" about the state of democratic progress in Bangladesh. They linked the decline to structural barriers within the electoral system, as well as rising gender-based violence and online harassment targeting women candidates, and emphasized that opportunity alone is insufficient without security, dignity, and meaningful investment in women's political leadership (The Financial Express, 2026).

The composition of the new parliament therefore reflects a striking contradiction. On the one hand are women activists who risked their lives during the uprising and who continue to face intimidation and technology-facilitated abuse when they attempt to enter formal politics. On the other is an institutional structure that has not addressed long-standing patterns of under-representation and has instead produced the weakest parliamentary outcome for women in a quarter century (The Daily Star, 2026a; Deutsche Welle, 2026).

V. CEDAW, Legal Frameworks, and the Meaning of Democratic Reform

Bangladesh ratified CEDAW in 1984 and has reported regularly to the CEDAW Committee. In recent years, it has adopted reforms such as establishing One-Stop Crisis Centres and limiting the use of a rape survivor's "character" evidence in court (CEDAW Committee, 2017). Yet the state maintains reservations to Article 2, which obliges comprehensive legal reforms to eliminate discrimination, and Article 16(1)(c), which guarantees equality in marriage and divorce. These reservations are justified in the name of religiously grounded personal laws (CEDAW Committee, 2017).

Women's organizations and the Citizens' Initiatives on CEDAW have long argued that as long as personal laws grant men superior rights in marriage, divorce, guardianship, and inheritance, gender-based violence will remain entrenched (Citizens' Initiatives on CEDAW, 2019). WARC's

proposals to reform family law and recognize marital rape as a crime were explicitly aligned with CEDAW General Recommendation 35, which treats gender-based violence as a form of discrimination requiring structural remedies (CEDAW Committee, 2017).

The post-election moment thus presents a sharp choice. Bangladesh can continue to treat CEDAW as a diplomatic obligation that sits alongside reservations and inconsistent domestic laws, or it can use the transition to remove its reservations and align constitutional, family, and electoral laws with substantive equality. Doing so would not automatically increase the number of women MPs, but it would signal that the state recognizes violence and discrimination as incompatible with democratic legitimacy (CEDAW Committee, 2017).

VI. Political Demands for a “New Bangladesh”

The combination of a 25-year low in women’s candidacy, a historic drop in women MPs, and documented online and offline attacks on women in politics makes clear that incremental, voluntary measures are not working (The Daily Star, 2026a; The Financial Express, 2026; iKNOW Politics, 2026). To move beyond symbolic inclusion and to honor women’s role in the uprising, the following political demands emerge from this analysis.

First, Bangladesh should withdraw its CEDAW reservations to Articles 2 and 16 within this parliamentary term and launch a time-bound process to reform personal laws so that they guarantee equality in marriage, divorce, guardianship, and inheritance, including explicit criminalization of marital rape (CEDAW Committee, 2017). Experiences from other Muslim-majority countries show that such reforms are possible and compatible with religious traditions. Morocco’s 2004 reform of the *Moudawana* strengthened women’s rights in marriage and divorce, while Tunisia has expanded women’s family rights through a series of legal reforms since 1950s; taken together, these examples demonstrate that legal reform in Muslim-majority contexts is both politically feasible and normatively grounded in local traditions.

Second, women’s reserved seats must be democratized. The current system of indirectly elected reserved seats, controlled by party leadership, should be replaced with seats elected directly by voters. This aligns with long-standing demands from women’s and feminist

organizations and would reduce party gatekeeping over which women enter parliament (Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, 2025; iKNOW Politics, 2026).

Third, binding rules on women's political representation are needed. Electoral laws should be amended to require parties to field women in at least 15 per cent of general seats in the next election, rising in steps to 33 per cent, with meaningful sanctions, including loss of public funding and eventual deregistration, for non-compliance. Given that in other contexts including Muslim majority country women are campaigning for parity, such a modest legal reform is hardly radical. At the same time, WARC's proposal to add 100 directly elected women's seats should be implemented, with constituency boundaries designed to avoid ghettoization of women members of parliament (BIGD, 2026; The Business Standard, 2026).

Fourth, online and offline gender-based violence should be treated as a central democratic concern rather than a secondary "women's issue". A specialized unit on technology-facilitated violence against women should be established, with clear powers to coordinate with platforms, the Election Commission, and law-enforcement agencies. Criminal and electoral laws should be updated in line with CEDAW General Recommendation 35 to recognize deepfakes, non-consensual image distribution, and coordinated online harassment as forms of violence and as infringements on political rights (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, 2025; CEDAW Committee, 2017).

Finally, feminist participation in reform processes needs to be institutionalized. WARC should be revived or reconstituted with a stronger mandate, transparent appointment processes, and guaranteed participation in constitutional and electoral-reform deliberations, so that women's rights are not treated as an optional add-on but as a core dimension of state restructuring (BIGD, 2026; The Business Standard, 2026).

These demands are neither utopian nor marginal. They flow directly from women's experiences in the Monsoon Revolution, the backlash they faced afterwards, and the reforms that feminist actors have already articulated (Chowdhury, 2025; BIGD, 2026). Whether Bangladesh's new rulers choose to act on them will determine whether the memory of the revolution is one of shared emancipation, or another moment when women were visible on the streets and invisible in the institutions that followed.

VII. What Kind of “New Bangladesh”?

The 2026 election and referendum have been hailed, not without reason, as the beginning of a “new Bangladesh.” The reforms under discussion could constrain executive overreach, bolster electoral credibility, and rebalance institutional power. Yet the content of this reconstruction remains deeply gendered. Women were indispensable to the fall of the old order: they marched, organized, cared, and voted. Today they hold seven of 300 directly elected parliamentary seats and three of 49 cabinet positions, and they remain largely absent from the forums where the country’s new political settlement is being negotiated (The Daily Star, 2026a; Dhaka Tribune, 2026).

Women’s representation within the executive has in fact declined. The previous cabinet included eight women ministers; the new government has appointed only three. Notably, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, the institution formally responsible for advancing gender equality, is now headed by a male minister. This shift underscores the continuing marginalization of women within the highest levels of political decision-making (Dhaka Tribune, 2026; The Business Standard, 2026).

This is not simply a “women’s issue.” Women constitute roughly 40 percent of Bangladesh’s labor force and carry out most of the the country’s social and biological reproduction through unpaid care and household labor. They sustain families, communities, and the economy, while facing increasing violence in both private and public spaces (World Bank, 2024; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, 2025). A political system in which such a large and indispensable part of society holds only a tiny share of parliamentary seats and even fewer positions of executive authority can hardly claim to be moving toward a fair or democratic order.

In this sense, women’s political exclusion is not a peripheral concern but a measure of the depth of Bangladesh’s democratic experiment. A system that relies on women’s labor and bodies in moments of crisis yet keeps them at the margins of decision-making in moments of reconstruction, cannot claim full democratic legitimacy.

The referendum delivered authorization. The election installed the actors tasked with implementing it. Whether this moment becomes a genuine democratic refounding, or another masculine restoration dressed in the language of reform, will depend on a single test: whether women's lives, rights, and leadership stand at the center of the new Bangladesh, or once again remain at its edges.

Acknowledgement: I am grateful to Professor Ozlem Altioek and Professor Homa Hoodfar for their support and thoughtful feedback on this paper.

References

1. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2026, February 18). Bangladesh's 2026 election: BNP landslide ends 'Two Begums' era.
2. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, & United Nations Population Fund. (2025). Violence against women survey 2024: Key findings.
3. Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust. (2025). Online gender-based violence and women in politics in Bangladesh.
4. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad. (2025). Women in politics: Demands for democratic representation.
5. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Labour force survey 2022–2023. Government of Bangladesh.
6. BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. (2026). Visible yet powerless? The Women's Affairs Reform Commission and the politics of intentional inaction.
7. CEDAW Committee. (2017). General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19 (CEDAW/C/GC/35).
8. Chowdhury, N. S. (2025). The return of politics in Bangladesh. *Journal of Democracy*, 36(1), 45–59.
9. Citizens' Initiatives on CEDAW. (2019). Shadow report on the implementation of CEDAW in Bangladesh.
10. Dhaka Tribune. (2026, February 20). The 5% that never came: Parties fall short on women candidates.
11. Deutsche Welle. (2026, February 26). Bangladesh sees historic low of women in parliament.
12. Hoodfar, H. (2025) commentary, the Governance, Resistance, and Feminist Solidarity, BRAC University, Dhaka, (21 December 20)
13. Human Rights Watch. (2025). "We are still afraid": Abuses against protesters and minorities in post-Monsoon Bangladesh.
14. iKNOW Politics. (2026, January 18). Violence against women and minorities rising in Bangladesh ahead of elections.
15. National Herald. (2026, February 15). Only seven women in Bangladesh's new parliament.

16. Reuters. (2026, January 21). How an Islamist party is gaining ground in Bangladesh, worrying moderates.
17. The Business Standard. (2026, February 16). Bangladesh's women: Visible yet powerless in politics.
18. The Daily Star. (2026a, March 7). 13th parliamentary polls: Women rights activists decry sharp decline in female representation.
19. The Daily Star. (2026b, July 10). Breakdown of the July National Charter.
20. The Financial Express. (2026, March 5). Women's participation in parliamentary elections at 25-year low; speakers call for safer political space.
21. United Nations. (2025). Three out of four women in Bangladesh experience violence, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics survey finds [Press release].
22. World Bank. (2024). Female labor force participation rate: Bangladesh. World Bank Data.

About the author

Arzu Tasnine Anna is a researcher and a Master's student. She is also a Graduate Assistant in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of North Texas and a Research Fellow at Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). She holds both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Dhaka. Her primary research interest is gender justice, political representation, and human rights, bridging research and advocacy to challenge structural inequality.

She can be reached at arnatasnim0@gmail.com

