"Something is Better than Nothing?": Political Party Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

Sohela Nazneen

Abstract: The paper analyses the discourses on women's empowerment among the three main political parties in Bangladesh: the Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat -e- Islami. It argues that the Islamist party, Jamaat, has taken a more comprehensive view of women's empowerment compared to the centrist parties, AL and BNP, who have an instrumentalist approach to women's empowerment. This divergence is partly a result of the need for Jamaat to ideologically convince supporters that they have been able to deal with the challenge raised by women's movement successfully. The centrist parties are able to disregard this pressure, and are perhaps reluctant to antagonize potential voters by appearing too 'un-Islamic.'

Key words: women's empowerment; political party; Islamist, Bangladesh, Jamat-e Islami

I.   Introduction:

In a televised debate before the elections in 2001, Sheikh Hasina, the incumbent Prime Minister, was asked why her government had foot dragged in introducing direct election to the reserved seats for women in the parliament and only stressed on extending the provision for reservation till 2006. Direct election in the reserved seats for women was an electoral promise the Awami League (AL) government made in 1996. It carried weight since the provision for reservation was set to end in 2001. Surprisingly, Sheikh Hasina replied that only an extension of the provision for reservation was possible since women's capacity to run campaigns and win elections was inadequate.[1] She stressed that women should understand that "a blind maternal uncle is better than having no maternal uncles" *(nai mamar che kana mama bhalo)*.[2] [The English version of this Bengali proverb is: something is better than nothing].

The comment by Sheikh Hasina illustrates how political parties have interpreted and incorporated ideas, notions, and conceptions around women's empowerment in their discourse. The objective of this paper is to analyse the discourses on women's empowerment among the three main political parties in Bangladesh: the Awami League (AL); Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP), and Jamaat-E-Islami. The paper examines and compares the formal party policy documents, party constitutions,

election manifestoes, and speeches by key political party leaders. The analysis of these documents focuses on the following areas: a) what issues and ideas have the political parties incorporated from the feminist and development discourses on women's empowerment; b) where do the dissonances lie in this incorporation process; c) where do the centrist and religion based parties vary on their discourse on women's empowerment.

The paper makes the following arguments. All of these parties have drawn from the national and international development discourses on women's empowerment and certain issues/ ideas propagated by the Bangladeshi feminists. However, compared to the two centrist parties, AL and BNP, the Islamist party, Jamaat adopted a more comprehensive view of women's empowerment. The centrist parties have either de-emphasised or justified policies on women's empowerment based on efficiency related grounds. An analysis of Jamaat's discourse on female supporter recruitment and mobilization indicates that this divergence is partly a result of the need for Jamaat to ideologically convince supporters that they have been able to deal with the challenge raised by feminist movement successfully. The centrist parties are able to disregard this pressure and are perhaps reluctant to antagonize the potential voters by appearing too un-Islamic.

The paper has the following structure. The next two sections briefly set the context and discuss methods respectively. Section four analyses party discourses on women's empowerment. The last two sections discuss dissonances within the party discourses and reflect on why the differences exist respectively.

II. The Political Context in Bangladesh and the Agenda for Women's Empowerment

The analysis of the political party discourses on women's empowerment issues needs to be contextualised within the history of: a) the nature of politics and the origins of the selected political parties; b) how women's organisations advocate issues related to women's empowerment and their relationship with these parties; c) the role played by donors in promoting a gender and development agenda.

Political Context:

Bangladesh emerged in 1971 and went through alternating periods of democratic (between the periods of 1972-75; 1979-1982; 1991-2006) and military rule (between the periods of 1975-1979; 1982-1990; 2006-2008). This alternation between different types of political systems had led to a specific form of political engagement pattern which is repressive and confrontational.

Awami League (AL) established in 1949; led the struggle against Pakistan for economic and political autonomy. Cultural and linguistic nationalism played key roles in forming the Bengali national identity based on which the autonomy movement was

organised. Given this history, AL had a strong socialist and secular agenda till 1974. However, AL has shifted from its original stance over the years.

During the period of early 1970s, the struggle between the left and the AL government led to a weakening of the left parties. The failure of state planned economic policies and the weakening of the left led to an early shift towards market economy and domination by centrist political parties, and the rise of Jamaat during the post authoritarian period in the 1990s.[3]

Aside from AL the other dominant centrist parties, the BNP and the Jatiya Party (JP),[4] were formed by military generals to legitimise their regimes. The successive military governments, both general Ziaur Rahman's (1977-1981), who later formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and held elections, and general Ershad's (1982-1990), who formed the JP, regime saw a marked shift towards privatisation, denationalisation, and state sponsorship of Islam. BNP abolished the fundamental principle of secularism in the Constitution in 1976 and JP introduced Islam as state religion in 1988. The key reasons behind a shift towards the right were to avert economic crisis and legitimise the regime. [5] Jamaat, which is the dominant Islamist party, was reinstated into politics during late 1970s by Ziaur Rahman. Jamaat had lost its political legitimacy in the post liberation period for it links with the Pakistani military. However, it has been able to create a strong political base over the years.

The anti-authoritarian popular movement was spearheaded by the AL and BNP in late 1980s which led to the fall of general Ershad in 1990. After 1990, the military formally retreated from the political space.[6] The electoral result of 1991, 1996 and 2001 elections indicate that a *de facto* two-party system has emerged during the post authoritarian period. [7] Interestingly, there are no significant programmatic or ideological differences on economic policies or on questions of ideological or social issues between the two major political parties. Initially, the political competition between the parties mainly centred on the issue of national identity with AL leaning towards a culturalist interpretation and BNP stressing religious homogeneity. Although in the late 1990s the latter interpretation has gained more political mileage, partly due to the formation of coalition government, both tacit and overt, with Islamist parties such as Jamaat- e-Islami.[8]

Women's Empowerment Agenda:

The women's empowerment agenda has been advocated and promoted by the women's organisations and also development agencies and NGOs, both international and local, in Bangladesh.[9] The women's movement in Bangladesh is a vibrant social movement that has focused on a broad range of issues from political empowerment, economic equality, legal reforms of customary and gender biased laws, violence against women, reproductive rights, etc.[10] The women's organisations at times have engaged with the political parties to incorporate their demands into the party agendas. However,

the nature of interaction that the women's organisations have with the political parties is influenced by the considerations regarding how associations with political parties will affect the legitimacy and autonomy of these organisations.[11]

The agenda for women's empowerment in Bangladesh is closely linked to the gender and development agenda, which is largely donor driven. [12]State dependence on aid in the 1970s and 1980s decades had a significant effect on the proliferation of gender and development projects implemented by the government and also the growth of the service delivery NGO sector.[13] This has created a specific type of discourse around women's empowerment that stresses women's productive role, individual empowerment through economic projects, and how women's economic empowerment can increase family welfare.

III. Methods:

This research uses primary data: party recruitment and mobilisation policy documents, leaflets and booklets published on women's empowerment, party constitutions, election manifestos, and pre and post election speeches by the party leaders. Analysis of the party discourses on women's empowerment focuses on: a) imagery, concepts, language used; b) dimensions, such as expectation of transformation, views on power; c) domains such as sites, process of empowerment; d) institutional means for attaining empowerment; e) the politics of the concept (i.e., association with other concepts, intellectual origins / political traditions etc).

The initial focus, to trace changes in party discourse since 1991, when democratic form of government was reestablished, had to be shifted to the present decade for the following reasons. Accessing party policy documents was difficult as party offices were closed till November 2008 and many of the top party leaders were in jail on corruption and other charges during the emergency rule. Moreover, the party websites were non-operational or did not contain updated information. The national archive was useful for accessing some of the key documents however, not all relevant documents were preserved by the archive. The elections held in 2008 mitigated the situation as party offices became functional. In addition, the research relied on news paper scans to gather data on the gaps. Five newspapers, which have different political leanings, were scanned for reports on party positions on national women's policy, election speeches etc.

IV. Discourse on Women's Empowerment

All three parties refer to women status, needs, and rights in their party constitution and election manifestos, which perhaps indicate that the parties acknowledge these as issues. However, their approach, emphasis and placement of issues vary. Among the three, BNP's Constitution only refers to women as a group when it discusses its objective on the effective use of human resources and labour power. BNP

party objective states: "To make appropriate and proper use of human resources including labour power of women."[14] This reflects an instrumental approach towards women (see later section). The AL party objectives refer to women's rights and empowerment in the following manner: "To stop oppression against women; to protect women's rights as well as dignity and to empower them by using female participation in all spheres of the state and social life"[15] Female participation remains a key theme that AL highlights in other policy documents however, the participation is limited to social and economic spheres, and does not include equality in the private sphere. Jamaat's Constitution does not include any such key objective that refers to women's empowerment. However, they have specified what the roles and duties of female workers are in their Constitution (see later section). Though Jamaat's Constitution does not state any particular objectives related to women's empowerment, its other policy documents show that it has a comprehensive view on what it intends to do and where its boundaries are regarding women's issues.

All three parties have a separate section in their election manifestos that detail out their key policy objectives for meeting women's needs. Interestingly, all three deal with children's issues in the same section. This tendency to lump women and children together is perhaps a legacy of the welfare approach. The language used varies; the centrist parties use women's empowerment (*narir khomotoyon*) while Jamaat uses women's rights (*narir odhikar*). In fact, Jamaat never refers to women's empowerment in their election manifesto or any other policy document. This omission by Jamaat is a way for it to place its women's agenda within the *Sharia* based rights discourse and to separate their agenda from the development discourse.

Development, growth and modernisation are concepts linked with women's empowerment in the policy documents and election manifestos of AL and BNP. This not surprising given poverty alleviation and development issues dominate the policy discourse. All three parties in their election manifestos take credit for improving the position and status of women in Bangladesh, and thus contributing towards development. Both BNP and Jamaat stress their role in improving women's access to education through the female stipend programme. AL highlights their role in formulating a National Women's Development policy.

Interestingly, AL and BNP, in their election manifestos of 2001 and 2008, mainly focus on women's issues that are identified as conventional and uncontroversial, such as maternal health care, girl's education, political participation, violence against women in the public sphere; certain forms of domestic violence such as dowry related violence. Among the 'new' issues that were added in 2001 are: the security needs of female garment workers; welfare needs of widows and elderly women; building dormitories for working women; etc. For both parties, the 2008 manifesto focused less on women's issues compared to the 2001 manifesto.

Admittedly, Jamaat also stresses the development angle in its election manifesto. Many of its policy recommendations related to women are the same as BNP's policies in areas such as women's education, violence against women etc. This is not surprising since these two parties were a part of a ruling coalition. However, Jamaat also has a comprehensive view on women and development issues. In addition to a specific section on women's rights, it included women's issues in other sections on social security, sports, public health and family planning, nutrition. This incorporation of women's issues under different sections is absent in the manifestos of the other two parties.

Moreover, Jamaat highlights the development impact of each policy on women. For example, the sports policy states that "For physical and mental development, measures will be taken so that all men and women can have access to sports and entertainment facilities that are 'appropriate' for them".[16] Admittedly, the operative word in the previous sentence is 'appropriate' which is vague and can be interpreted in many different ways. What motivates Jamaat to take this comprehensive approach?

Undeniably, all three parties have incorporated ideas that are dominant in the development discourse on women's needs and empowerment. For example, they used terms such as 'female headed households' (both *de jure* and *de facto*), maternal health (*matre shasthyo*) in their manifesto. In fact, they refer to the UN conventions (Jamaat only refers to the Child Rights Convention) and human rights. Some of the issues they have incorporated reflect the demands raised by the women's movement, such as increasing the number of reserved seats, prevention of acid violence against women etc. None of the parties refer to addressing inequality in the private sphere, a key demand of the feminists.

The analysis of the election manifestos also reveal that women's empowerment or establishment of women's rights (for Jamaat) is seen as an outcome of various institutional measures, such as, reservation of parliamentary seats, enactment of new laws or strengthening existing laws on violence against women; or provision of government services. Although both AL and BNP focus on women's role in the private and public spheres, the emphasis is still on the reproductive roles of women within the family, and women as agents participating in the market. The instruments of women's empowerment that are prioritised in the manifestos of all three parties are: microfinance, legal reform, access to public services, employment. Face to face mobilisation (prioritised for attaining party goals), collective activities within the civil society and politics are not emphasized. Admittedly, AL vaguely refers to 'participation in the public and social spheres.' However, it is the other development instruments that are discussed in detail. Given that both, AL and BNP, particularly the latter, justify focusing on women's needs and empowerment based on efficiency related grounds, the prioritisation of economic and legal instruments reflect this thought process (see next section).

V. Dissonances:

There are dissonances within the centrist political party discourses on women's empowerment. Both AL and BNP state in their manifesto that they will take steps to remove gender inequality. However, the discussion above reveals that both AL and BNP take an instrumental view for focusing on women's empowerment without any reference to collective empowerment or changing social structure. BNP manifesto justifies its policy recommendation for women by stating: "Women are half of the total population. They are a relatively backward (*poshchadpdo*) section of the society. No nation can be economically and socially developed leaving half of its people illiterate, dependent, and lacking in self confidence."[17] The incorporation of the concepts such as dependent and self confidence indicates an acknowledgement of the fact that women's empowerment incorporates other dimensions. However, the manifesto later states that, "BNP wants to ensure that women are able to attain their appropriate (*jothartho*) social status and dignity."[18] This leaves room for ambiguous interpretation about what is appropriate or not for women. Improving women's status does not necessarily mean that the party will focus on women's empowerment. Interestingly, in 2008 BNP made no such justification but only stated that it wanted to 'improve the position of other half of the population,' shift towards a de-emphasis on women's issues.

AL's instrumental policy recommendations also contradict its key objective to ensure women's empowerment through "participation in all spheres of life".[19] AL states that it will aim to: "Ensure equal rights of women within the state and society… eradicating gender inequality, using UN declarations and the Platform for Action (PFA) as a basis.."[20] However, the AL manifesto also states that it will not pass any laws or take steps that are contradictory to the *Quran* and *Sunnah*. This makes it difficult to incorporate demands for reforming family laws, which are a major source of gender inequality in Bangladesh. Interestingly, in 2008 AL removed any references to PFA, but have repeatedly stressed that it will not take steps contradictory to the *Quran* or *Sunnah*.

Jamaat does not claim to address gender inequality between men and women. It states that men and women have complementary role and each is the others helpmate. Its policies recommendations in the manifesto are made in light of ensuring 'sufficient (*upjukto*) respect for women and their rights'.[21] This is why Jamaat fashioned its language in a manner that leaves room for incorporating this view. For example, the sports policy that is outlined before includes the word 'appropriate,' which leaves room for determining what is appropriate for men and women. Jamaat has identified reproductive health as a key policy area but only focused on improving quality of service delivery but not on women's rights. It has incorporated the policy to ensure employment for women. But it stipulates that employment will be 'based on merit' and

has not discussed the current policy on quotas for women in the public service. This careful positioning demonstrates how Jamaat has incorporated the present reality where a large section of the female population works though this does not smoothly sit with its idea of men and women playing complementary roles.

VI. Reflections on Dissonance and 'Blind Uncle' Like Behaviour:

Why do these dissonances exist within party discourses? For Jamaat, it is very clear that it want to ensure the 'highest' rights and dignity accorded to women under Islam.[22] However, it is also aware about the challenges it faces from the women's movement in Bangladesh and the dominance of present discourse on women's rights and development. The speeches by Nizami[23], one of the top leaders of Jamaat, and booklets published by Jamaat on women's recruitment [24] reveal their views on feminist movement and women's participation. Nizami points out the following. First, women's participation in 'various social, political and cultural activities, particularly those that are un-Islamic has increased'.[25] Second, the 'ideas on women's rights, progress and development has created confusion among the ordinary women about Islam'.[26] Nizami argues that since recruitment of female workers is at a nascent stage Jamaat needed to convince women to join its ranks by 'drawing attention of the women, gaining their confidence, showing them what true Islam is'.[27] This meant being able to incorporate the dominant concepts and ideas on women's development issues related to work, violence against women in the public and also private (such as matter related to dowry) etc without challenging the basic tenets around the complementary role played by the sexes. This required couching the language in ways that highlighted issues such as dignity and rights without bringing in empowerment or challenging the established interpretations of the *Sharia*.

For the other two centrist parties, AL and BNP the dissonances reveal that they have tried to 'make the appropriate noises' that would allow them to present the party as a progressive (*progotishil*) force for women. Despite the references to the UN conventions or women's participation in public spheres their focus remains instrumental, justifying women's empowerment on the grounds that it would lead to the effective use of women's labour power or allow women to contribute towards nation building. The women's movement in Bangladesh, though it is vibrant, have had limited impact on electoral politics. Though these parties have included issues that were raised by women's movement, such as prevention of acid violence (added after 2000) or increasing women' seats in the parliament. However, the parties are aware that including controversial issues such as the reform of personal laws in their agenda would not win them votes from the conservative quarters and may allow their opponents to accuse them as un-Islamic. The focus on development issues such as employment, maternal health, old age pension remains uncontroversial, whose development impact on family welfare are easier to demonstrate.

The discussion above on party discourses on women's empowerment demonstrates that political parties are still acting as the proverbial 'blind uncles.'

Undeniably, it is better to have some issues on the political agenda than to have none. But one also needs to ask what the content of the 'something' is before deciding if that is really the better option.

---

[1] On March 8, 2009 Sheikh Hasina declared that her government would try to raise the number of reserve seats to a hundred seats.

[2] In Bengali society, maternal uncles play a key role in lavishing affection and providing protection and security in need. The uncle plays the role of a key patron, specifically when space and opportunities need to be created. Someone without maternal uncles is thought to be very unfortunate as s/he lacks a key social resource.

[3] Naomi Hossain, *Elite Perceptions of Poverty in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: UPL, 2005), 5

[4] During middle of this decade, JP had lost its political footing. Its key leaders were in jail and there was fragmentation within the party. However, things have changed for them after they formed a coalition with AL for the 2008 elections.

[5] Naomi Hossain, *Elite Perceptions of Poverty in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: UPL, 2005), 5

[6] In 2001 and 2006, the army had intervened to ensure elections and to maintain law and order. The deployment of the army in 2001 was decided by the Care-taker government and in 2006 the army intervention was forced by the unstable situation created by political parties.

[7] Mirza Hassan, "Demand for Second Generation Reform: The Case of Bangladesh," (PhD Thesis, University of London, 2002), 39

[8] Sohela Nazneen, "Gender Sensitive Accountability of Service Delivery NGOs: BRAC and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh" (PhD Thesis, IDS, University of Sussex), 54

[9] Anne Marie Goetz, *Women Development Workers* (Dhaka: UPL, 2001), 63

[10] Roushan Jahan, "Men in Seclusion and Women in Public: Rokeya's Dreams and Women's Struggles in Bangladesh, in *The Challenges of Local Feminism*: *Women's Movement in Global Perspective*, ed. Amrita Basu (Boulder: Westview), 98-103

[11] Sohela Nazneen and Maheen Sultan, "Opportunistic Overtures, Distancing and Reciprocity: Women's Organisations Negotiating Legitimacy and Space in Bangladesh" (Paper presented at the Review Conference of Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC, Cairo, January 19-25, 2009)

[12] Anne Marie Goetz, *Women Development Workers* (Dhaka: UPL, 2001), 58

[13] Sohela Nazneen, "Gender Sensitive Accountability of Service Delivery NGOs: BRAC and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh (PhD Thesis, IDS, University of Sussex), 1-3

[14] BNP Constitution, 2008 www.bnpbd.org (accessed August 20, 2008)

[15] AL Constitution, www.albd.org (accessed November 19, 2008)

[16] Jamaat-e islami, Bangladesh, *Election Manifesto 2007*, 20

[17] 'BNP Election Manifesto, 2001', *Prothom Alo*, Sepetmber 8, 2001

[18] ibid

[19] 'AL Election Manifesto, 2001,' *Prothom Alo*, Sepetmber 10, 2001

[20] 'AL Election Manifesto, 2001,' *Prothom Alo*, Sepetmber 10, 2001

[21] Jamaat-e islami, Bangladesh, *Election Manifesto 2007*, 21

[22] Jamaat-e islami, Bangladesh, *Election Manifesto 2007*, 21

[23] Motiur Rahman Nizami, *Nari Shomaje Daota O Shoghthon Shomporhsorner Upay*, (Dhaka: Jamaat Publications Section)

[24] ibid

[25] ibid, 22

[26] ibid, 22

[27] ibid, 22

Bibliography:

Awami League, 'Election Manifesto, 2001,' *Prothom Alo*., September 10, 2001

Awami League, 'Election Manifesto, 2008,' *Jai Jai Din*, December 13, 2008

Awami League, 'Party Constitution,' http://www.albd.org

BNP, Election Manifesto, 2001, *Prothom Alo*, September 8, 2001

BNP, Election Manifesto, 2008, Dhaka: BNP

BNP, Party Constitution, http://www.bnpbd.org

Goetz, Anne Marie, *Women Development Workers*, Dhaka: UPL, 2001

Hassan, Mirza, *The Demand for Second Generation Reform: The Case of Bangladesh,*' PhD thesis, University of London, 2002

Hossain, Naomi. *Elite Perceptions of Poverty in Bangladesh,* Dhaka :UPL, 2005

Jahan, Roushan, 'Men in Seclusion and Women in Public: Rokeya's Dreams and Women's Struggles in Bangladesh,' in The *Challenges of Local Feminisms: Women's Movement in Global Perspective,* edited by Amrita Basu, 87-109, Boulder: Westview Press

Jamaat-e Islami, *Election Manifesto* 2007, Dhaka: Jamaat publication section, 2007,

Jammat-e Islami, *Gothontantra* Dhaka: Jamaat publication section, 2007

Nazneen, Sohela "*Gender Sensitive Accountability of Service Delivery NGOs: BRAC and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh,*" PhD thesis, IDS, University of Sussex, 2008

Nazneen, Sohela and Maheen Sultan, "Opportunistic Overtures, Reciprocity and Distancing: Women's Organisations Negotiating Legitimacy and Space," Paper presented at the Mid Term Review of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC, Cairo, January 19-25, 2009

Nizami, Motiur Rahman, '*Nari Shomaje Daoat and Shangathon Shomprosharoner Upay*,' Dhaka: Jammat Publication Section, 2004

Sohela Nazneen, PhD is Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka and Research Fellow, Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium, South Asia Hub, based at the BRAC Development Institute (BDI). This paper is based on the work done for Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium.