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Women's Reserved Seat Systems in Bangladesh

This fact sheet provides a summary of the four different ways women's reserved seats in Bangladesh are currently filled: one system at the national level, two at the subdistrict level and one at the local level. It is noteworthy that reserved seats are not just applied to each level of government, but that each level actually has a different *system* for filling seats. The descriptions below illustrate the variety of systems through which women's representation has been addressed in Bangladesh, and the many lessons that can be learned about the effectiveness of reserved seats from the parallel existence of these very different systems.

General and Reserved Seats

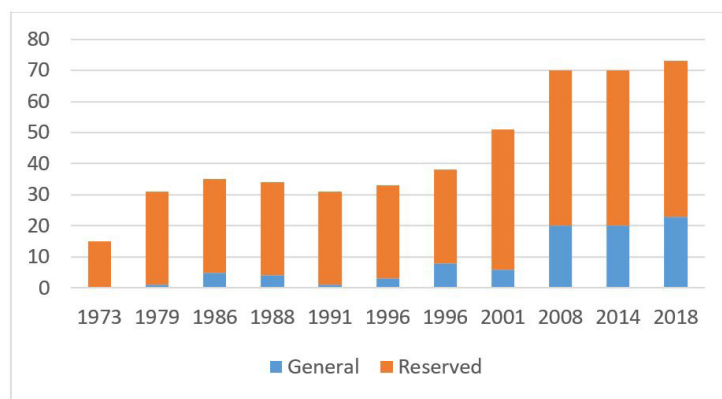
All elections for general seats in Bangladesh are held through a direct, first-past-the-post (FPTP) vote. However, to encourage women's political representation, Bangladesh instituted temporary special measures (TSMs) by reserving a certain number of seats for women at all levels of government¹ – national and local.² This is in accordance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by Bangladesh in 1984, which specifies that

“these types of measures shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present Convention.”

The TSMs are not intended to be permanent; they are in place until women's representation can be deemed adequate without

the assistance of special measures. Although women in Bangladesh can run for general seats, most women candidates opt to run for reserved seats as these are easier for women to contest than general seats. As with general seats, women contesting reserved seats may run on a political party ticket or as independent candidates.

Figure 1: Number of Women Elected to General and Reserved Seats in the Bangladesh Parliament



Members of Parliament

The reservation for women members of Parliament (MPs) at the national level is 50 seats out of a total of 350 seats as per the 15th Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh. The percentage of women's reserved seats is therefore roughly 14 percent. Some women are elected through general seats as well, bringing the total percentage of women representatives in the 11th Parliament (2018) to 21 percent.

Bangladesh has a FPTP system for general seats in Parliament, and a single transferable vote (STV) system for women's reserved seats based on the number of seats secured by a political party. Seats are allocated in proportion to the number of general seats

1 The variation in the size of the quotas for reserved seats for different tiers of government may be due to the lack of specificity in the Constitution or any other law governing all tiers of government regarding women's reserved seats, except for parliamentary seats, which is set at 50.

2 District (*Zila*) Council elections have never been held to date.

– as opposed to the proportion of votes – won by each party in a FPTP parliamentary election, exaggerating the disproportionality of the results of the general seats.

In contrast with general seats, for which Bangladesh is divided into 300 constituencies, the whole country serves as one large multimember electoral area for reserved seats, with the general seat MPs acting as the electorate. The Bangladesh Election Commission allocates the number of seats to each party in proportion to the general seats won and prepares a voter list for each party consisting of the general seat MPs for that party. The party presents a list of candidates, with each candidate requiring a proposer and seconder from the same party. If the numbers of candidates and seats are the same, there is no election and the reserved seats are filled as per the list prepared by party leaders. If there are more candidates than seats for the party, the general seat MPs vote by ranking their parties' candidates using a STV system. If a party nominates fewer candidates than they have seats, the remaining seats can be contested by all parties.

In practice, the STV system has never been used. The reserved seats in Parliament have never gone to vote in Bangladesh because party leaders have nominated only as many candidates as there are available seats for each party. Even if an election for reserved seats were held, the STV used may not be a true proportional system, because each voter (MP) votes for candidates within his or her party only, and thus it becomes more of a "personal vote" system for MPs.

Subdistrict Councils

The elected leadership of subdistricts (Upazilas) in Bangladesh is chosen in two separate ways. In the first instance, a direct FPTP election is held for the Subdistrict Council positions of one general seat chair, one general seat vice chair, and one women's reserved seat vice chair. All three positions are contested in the same electoral area with the same electorate, but with separate ballots for all three. The percentage of seats reserved for women is one-third, or 33 percent. However, the three positions are not equal, as the chair has higher status than the two vice chairs. In the 2019 elections, only five women were elected to the general seat chair position and no women were elected to the general seat vice chair position.

In addition to the election of the chair and two vice chairs for each subdistrict, another method is used to fill general seats on the Subdistrict Council. The general seats on the Subdistrict Council are filled indirectly by people elected at the lowest level of government – Union Council chairperson and Municipality (Pourashava) mayors – who represent their union or municipality in the higher-level Subdistrict Council as ex officio members. One seat for every three general seats, or 25 percent of the total number of seats on each council, is reserved for a woman. However, there are too many reserved seat holders at the union or municipality level, and so a mechanism is needed to choose the representatives for the women's reserved seats at the subdistrict level.

Reserved seat members are elected indirectly with women members and councilors from the local government councils – approximately 13,500 people in the 2015 election – serving as the electorate. A multiple, concurrent plurality voting system is used, with the same electorate – all women's union or municipality reserved seat holders in the subdistrict – but with separate ballots and electoral areas for each reserved seat. The subdistrict is divided into electoral areas with approximately three unions or municipalities forming the electoral area for each reserved seat in the Subdistrict Council. All reserved seat council members from unions and municipalities in the subdistrict can nominate themselves as candidates. The exact number of reserved seats in each Subdistrict Council depends on the number of unions and municipalities in the subdistrict, with, as noted above, 25 percent of the total number of seats on each council reserved for women.

The electoral system for this election is unusual in that the voter is able to vote in multiple electoral areas – even in ones where they are not from.

Local Councils

Elections for the Union, Municipality and City Corporation Reserved Seat Council members at the local level are organized using a FPTP system with "superdistricts." This means that three general seat wards are usually combined into one larger electoral area (a superdistrict) for one women's reserved seat.³ Each voter casts a ballot for both a general and a women's council seat. The percentage of reserved seats is roughly one-fourth or 25 percent of all council seats. There are currently no reservations in place for Union Council chair or Municipality/City Corporation mayor positions. There are very few general seat female mayors or union and subdistrict chairwomen, and also very few general seat – as opposed to reserved seat – councilwomen on the various councils.

3 For municipalities and cities, the number of wards per reserved seat may vary slightly.

Figure 2: Number of Women General Seat Holders at All Levels of Government⁴

General Seat Position	Number of Women in General Seats	Total Number of General Seats	Percentage of WOMen in General Seats
Member of Parliament	23	300	7.67%
Subdistrict Chair	5	492	1.02%
Subdistrict Vice Chair	0	492	0%
City Corporation Mayor	1	12	8.33%
City Corporation Councilor	0	396	0%
Municipality Mayor	8	328	2.44%
Municipality Councilor	4	2,972	0.13%
Union Council Chair	29	4,571	0.63%
Union Councilor	6	41,139	0.01%

⁴ Table of women general seat holders, provided by various stakeholders to IFES in January 2020.