

Political Participation of Women in Bangladesh and Japan: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: *The paper attempts to examine the challenges women in Bangladesh and Japan face while participating in political affairs. It utilizes a qualitative interpretation of numerical data published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and other reliable sources, accompanied by a comprehensive analysis of policies and documents, to understand the underlying factors that contribute to the political backdrop of women in Bangladesh and Japan. Through comparative analysis, this research finds that, though both nations are lagging in terms of women's equal political representation, Bangladesh has shown significant improvement in recent years compared to Japan. Traditional assumptions of gender roles in society, male-dominated political systems, self-motivation and support from society, financial dependency, educational awareness about politics, political party support, and motherhood are the common factors playing a role in women's political engagement in both societies, as identified by this research. This research generates policy recommendations for enhancing women's involvement in decision-making. It will contribute to effective socio-political reform for equal representation of women in both parliamentary and local politics, which is a crucial part of Gender Equality (SDG goal 5) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG goal 10).*

Keywords: *Women, Bangladesh, Japan, Political Participation, Decision-making, Parliament*

1. Introduction

Women comprise half the population in the world and are equal parts of the growth, development, and survival of human society alongside men. Despite their equal role and contribution to society, women are often underrepresented in different dimensions of society, particularly in politics. Due to the lack of female participation in politics, the voices, perspectives, and varied experiences of women are often unheard and unrecognized, leading to much discrimination against women in society. Female representation in the politics of Japan and Bangladesh is characterized by constitutional provisions promoting gender equality, yet both countries face distinct challenges in achieving substantial female political participation.

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This study aims to assess women's participation in politics in Bangladesh and Japan and generate policy recommendations based on the challenges identified regarding women's political involvement in both countries. By employing a theoretical framework rooted in liberal principles, the study seeks to uncover the multifaceted dynamics affecting women's participation in politics. The methodology adopted for this research involves a qualitative approach grounded in secondary sources. Utilizing an inductive case study method, the investigation explores the political backdrop of female politicians in both countries. The findings provide a detailed examination of the challenges faced by women in Bangladesh, including social biases, financial constraints, and a dominating 'Mastan culture.' The study also evaluates the reserved seat system and other government policies. The research indicates that disparities exist in women's political involvement in Japan, despite better economic participation, educational attainment, and health and survival compared to Bangladesh. While both countries have shown an increase in women's participation in politics over the years, Bangladesh has also exhibited more substantial progress. Several recommendations have been proposed to address the existing challenges, emphasizing the need to challenge traditional gender roles, implement institutional reforms, support motherhood, encourage political party initiatives, and promote women's participation as a national issue. This research plays a significant role in understanding the nuanced challenges of political participation encountered by women in Bangladesh and Japan. By examining the socio-cultural, political, and economic impediments, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender disparities in political representation, offering valuable insights for policymakers and advocates striving for inclusive governance.

2. Literature Review

Like many other countries, the people of Bangladesh and Japan still believe in the traditional gender roles of men and women in society and life (Asaduzzaman et al., 2015; Charlebois, 2013). Japanese culture supports women's traditional role of motherhood and childbearing fueled by traditional Confucian beliefs. Today, it remains an important part of Japanese society (Mun, 2015). For Japanese women, different types of expectations emerge from their family, friends, relatives, and society as well. These are different kinds of familial responsibilities, e.g., job responsibilities, expectations from the elderly members of the family and society, traditional education system-based responsibility, and expectations from relatives (Belarmino & Roberts, 2019). Bangladeshi people hold a similar mindset regarding this issue (Islam & Asadullah, 2018). A survey conducted in 2020 claimed that a female member handles 3.6 times more household work than a male member of a family (Oi, 2021). In contrast, a man participates only 30 minutes on average in household work in a day (Kincaid, 2019). This discriminatory participation of male members in household activities reflects the domestic work pressure on women.

In Japanese and Bangladeshi society, a family is built up through marriage, and a married woman has many obligations towards her in-laws (Jisun, 2016; Raymo

et al., 2015). The primary duty is childbearing and caring for the whole family. In fact, in Japan, married women who have no children are considered the same as ‘Class A’ war criminals (Dalton, 2019). If an employed woman gets married, then, in most cases, she needs to quit her job to care for her child and to look after her in-laws’ family members. Besides, taking care of older adults and putting substantial efforts towards the husband are usual expectations from the family for married women (Kazui, 1997). However, married women can work part-time jobs with little salary. A poll reveals that as of 2019 in Japan, around half of the employed females are involved in non-regular employment (Buchholz, 2019).

In Bangladesh, a woman needs to fulfill the expectations of family and relatives to increase her acceptance and respect in the family, and many view these duties as the measurements of a woman’s capability (Karim et al., 2018). In Japan, most families do not support women working outside (Schultz Lee, 2010). This phenomenon of expectations from women is common both in young and adults. During dating, the boyfriends expect very supportive behavior from their girlfriends. They expect a special kind of behavior known as ‘*Kawaii Bunka*’ or the culture of being cute and not being bold in front of others except their boyfriends (Kincaid, 2019). Traditional Japanese expectations of a woman are to be very feminine and to stay at home and take care of the family members (Charlebois, 2013). Therefore, due to a lack of support from family members, women do not feel encouraged to participate in the economic sector or explore other activities, including political activities, outside of households. This aspect plays a crucial role in understanding different phenomena regarding the political participation of women in Japan. However, the situation is changing in Japan through government initiatives. A declining labor force and an aging population had prompted the former PM Abe’s cabinet to adopt policies, e.g., the Female Employment Promotion Legislation, to address issues like balancing a career and motherhood, inadequate childcare and nursing services, unfriendly workplace, and motivate Japanese women to enter the workforce, which opened the floor for discussions regarding empowering women in national politics (ROIBU & CRUCIANU, 2016)

2.1 Political Participation of Women

Women’s representation in the political affairs of a democratic country is a prerequisite for establishing a gender-equal society. Here, participation in political affairs indicated their involvement in the decision-making process of a country, direct political party affiliation, participation in the election, vote casting power, and so on. On the other hand, to ensure the proper recognition of a progressing society, it is now time to admit that women are not a burden; they are now self-dependent with educational qualifications and financial capacity. So, it is necessary to ensure women’s political engagement. The capacity to confidently check reality is an instinct for humans. In this sense, women’s capacity is questionable because of their lack of participation in politics. The main elements for women’s empowerment

are her preserving nature, trustworthiness, tolerance, sincerity, moral integrity, loyalty, generosity, sincere regard for respected individuals, and awareness of her physical and mental well-being, which lie within themselves. (Banna, 2022). They need to be nurtured well through proper education and fruitful guidance in order to emerge in the political sphere. Without women's active engagement in socio-political affairs, none of the exceptional aspects of women's empowerment can improve their grounds in society. Such a society can neither gain any sustainable development nor be considered a gender-equal society (Bayeh, 2016). At present, directly or indirectly, women have less access to different political institutions. This is mostly because of the practice of unequal societal opportunities for women to build a political career. Apart from equal opportunities, the practice of education to become a politician is also limited (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Dahlerup, 2013). Furthermore, female politicians often face sexual harassment in their workplaces, leading to a decline in motivation for politics (Krook & Sanín, 2020).

The percentage of women in politics in Japan has gradually increased since they first asserted their right to run for office in the general election of 1946. Consequently, the Gender Parity law for the Candidate Election was enforced in 2018 by the Japanese government to encourage women to take part in national politics (Sakakibara & Fujisaki, 2022). Besides, Japan planned to balance the male and female participation ratio in politics through this law. Another major law was enacted in 2020, titled the 5th Basic Plan for Gender Equality, by the Japanese government. By 2025, Japan plans to have 35% female participants in the House of Councilors (The Mainichi, 2022). In this law, Japan is trying to introduce a new system where women candidates would be facilitated by the 'Quota System'. This system would demand a fixed number of female candidates from all the political parties in Japan. Further, the Japanese government has the initiative to provide one year of parental leave for both Japanese males and females and childcare leave to tackle their two big challenges: the declining birth rate and the inclusion of women in the workforce (List, 2021).

Likewise, Bangladeshi women also take part in domestic political activities. Since 1952, the language movement, Bangladeshi women have been taking part actively in mass movements, and the world has witnessed the bravest Bengali women's participation in the independence war and their sacrifice (Saikia, 2011). At present, women's participation in politics has progressed, and female activists are aware of the need to secure their demands. Articles 9, 27, 28.1, 28.2, 28.3, and 65.3 of the Constitution of Bangladesh declare that females will be treated equally to men (Dutta & Khanom, 2021). This constitutional recognition promotes women's independent participation in every sphere of life. In a descriptive sense, it ensures gender equality within society. Thus, Bangladesh ranked 9th out of 149 countries in the global gender gap report 2022 on the political empowerment context (WEF, 2022).

2.2 Women in Leadership and Decision-making

Though societal structures vary widely, many societies exhibit elements of male dominance and patriarchy to many degrees that ultimately limit the ascension of women in decision-making and leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Socialist theorists argue that capitalism perpetuates patriarchy by exploiting labor and women, while radical feminists believe it is a fundamental and systematic oppression of women (Eisenstein, 2004; Willis, 1984). Liberals focus on legal barriers to gender equality, arguing that overcoming male dominance requires dismantling discriminatory laws, promoting equal opportunities, and challenging stereotypes (Baer, 1999). Intersectional feminists recognize that gender oppression intersects with other forms of discrimination based on race, class, and other factors (Dill & Kohlman, 2012). Historically, women have been portrayed as invisible, uninspired, ignorant, politically inept, and reliant on men's expertise. Limited access to political institutions, difficulties balancing public and home lives, and inadequate education prepare women poorly for politics. Cultural norms often expect women to fulfill different functions than men, and they often lack party support, particularly financial backing, making it difficult for them to participate in decision-making (Classen, 1997; Head-König, 1991; Kleinberg, 1988; Singh & Raghuvanshi, 2012). In a male-dominated society, women are not always welcomed warmly as leaders. It is unfortunate that most societies do not appreciate women's skills and do not trust their leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women, in most cases, as household decision-makers, are quite successful (Acharya et al., 2010). On the contrary, opportunities for women to show their capabilities as decision-makers in politics or take part in organizational decision-making are quite limited and full of hindrances for women (Xiang et al., 2017).

Female representation in leadership and decision-making processes is not at an appreciating level in both Japan and Bangladesh. Japanese tradition suggests three phases when a female's responsibilities are handed over to a male family member. For instance, at a tender age, she is her father's responsibility; after marriage, she needs to cave into her husband; and in her old age, Japanese women become the responsibility of their elder son (Cooper, 2013; Mamun & Reza, 2015; Belarmino & Roberts, 2019). In fact, these three, father, husband, and son, are the household superior and supreme decision-makers, irrespective of their age, making all major decisions of the family, also the ones involving the women in the family. In Japanese society, '*Filial Piety*' is a popular Confucian ritual and norm that emphasizes devotion to family (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). It is, indeed, the strongest moral value that tied Japanese families into strong bonds to maintain hierarchical procedure.

Despite former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's '*Womenomics*' policy, which encourages more Japanese women to hold leadership positions to combat a labor shortage and a rapidly aging population, Japan has struggled to boost women's

participation in leadership positions (Coleman, 2016). Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is Japan's largest and most popular political party. If Japan wants to change its people's perception of women's participation in politics, then change must take place within the ruling party's, LDP, internal views regarding this burning issue. Other political parties, such as the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), took the initiative to increase their female participants by around 40%. Therefore, the CDP has nominated 51% female candidates, the JCP 55.2%, and the SDP 41.7% for the UH election in 2022, whereas the LDP nominated only 23.2% female candidates (The Mainichi, 2022). This disparity reveals that women's participation in the opposition political parties is higher than the leading party. Therefore, it is high time to update the LDP leader's mindset about women's participation in politics.

Japan had the vision to promote women's leading roles in society by 2020. Moreover, they have targeted to enhance women's participation in private companies as managers by around 30% by 2030 (Oi, 2021). The aim will not be simple to accomplish as the main causes of the issue, including a shortage of childcare services and organizations' failure to hire and train females in senior management positions, remain unresolved (Nakamura et al., 2021). In Japan, women often leave their occupations because they are dissatisfied with their rank or designation, as there is a lack of advancement in their workplace (Nakamura et al., 2021). Another survey found that Japan will need 24.7 years more to achieve 30% women's participation as managers in private companies (Oi, 2021).

In Bangladesh, the chiefs of both the leading political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are female. The present prime minister of Bangladesh and the opposition party leader of the parliament, as of 2023, are also female, and the speaker of the parliament is a female representative as well. However, due to less party support, traditional thought of male-led politics, political parties prefer male senior politicians, etc. Consequently, a small number of females take part in the political decision-making process (Haque, 2021). On the contrary, the number of Bangladeshi females has progressed considerably in the workforce, especially in the readymade garments (RMGs) sector, where 60 percent of workers are women (Tarek, 2021). In addition, the World Bank (WB) data reveals that Bangladeshi female participation in the labor force reached 40 percent in 2019, and the percentage was 23 in 1990; however, only 17.1 percent were in managerial positions (Tarek, 2021). Despite the Bangladesh Government enacting the National Women Development Policy in 2011 to promote women's emancipation, the number of female representatives in leadership positions and the decision-making process has not reached its visionary peak yet, as one source claimed that only 18 percent of the company's board directors are female (The Daily Star, 2022).

2.3 Gap in the Existing Literature

Panday & Li presented an argument in 2014 indicating three core reasons in support of female involvement in politics; for instance, (1) half of the population is female. Therefore, they should take half the seats; (2) in terms of social and biological context, female experiences are different from male experiences, and both deserve equal representation; and (3) in part, male and female interests compete. Therefore, the male cannot replace the female's position through the lens of interest group discourse. Women themselves have had enormous impacts on their legislatures and their political parties by advocating the inclusion of good measures for promoting their representation (Osborn, 2012). The existing literature revealed that women in Bangladesh and Japan are progressing day by day, and both countries' women's political representation has been studied individually; however, there is no comparative analysis of women's participation in the political sphere. Besides, there is no correlational study where each can share their strengths and take lessons to empower women politically. Due to the growing cooperation between Bangladesh and Japan, it is high time to investigate the time-demanding issue of uplifting women in both countries. Moreover, having a similar mindset regarding women and their responsibilities in the family, this research is more relevant for comparison between Bangladesh and Japan. Still, there are socioeconomic differences that exist; although, after conducting this research and from its findings, women can get encouragement. Therefore, females' enthusiastic involvement in every decision-making procedure of a nation is crucial. Consequently, it will help to find a constructive solution to engage women in the decision-making process. At the same time, women can also represent themselves in the political atmosphere; they can strongly condemn violations of their rights and raise their voices against the odds and discrimination.

3. Theoretical Framework

Feminists advocate for equal rights for men and women in society's multidisciplinary fields. It supports the abolishment of gender-based stratification to promote women as human resources who belong to an equal position as men in all spheres of society (Beasley, 1999). As a result, liberal feminism is one such dimension of feminism theory that is directly related to individual development based on self-knowledge and capability rather than dividing on sexual identity (Anderson et al., 1999). Also, traditional or old ways of thinking or social and cultural hegemony should not stop women from taking part in politics and making decisions. Instead, this must be free for every human being in accordance with their interest. Besides, in this competitive world, women are not a burden. They are like independent individuals who take responsibility for themselves. In that sense, this study used feminist theory to shed light on women's political participation in Bangladesh and Japan. By working against gender violence and discrimination, this theoretical perspective helps to create an inclusive society where women's advocacy in every sector is highly appreciated for building a sustainable future. Questioning the

existing structure is a positive aspect of this research, as it utilizes the feminist theoretical perspective to implement other initiatives. In this regard, promulgation of the law may be required in some instances in order to ensure equal rights and opportunities for protecting women's rights (Moffitt & Levitas, 2021; Crossman, 2020).

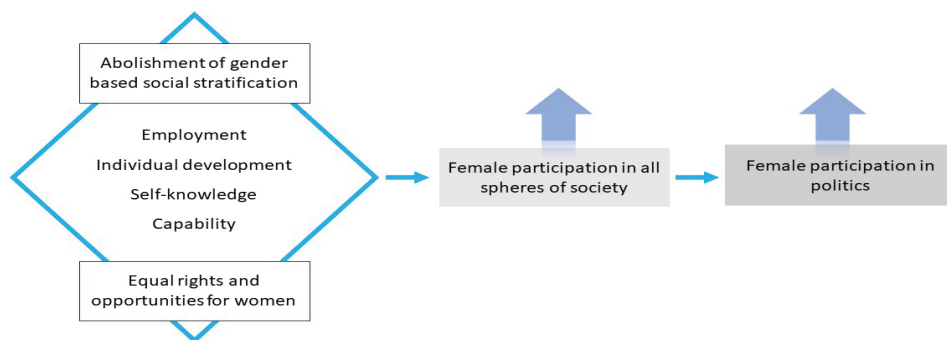


Figure 1: Developed by the author based on Arinder (n.d.)

4. Methodology

Based on secondary sources, this qualitative paper looks at how women are represented in politics in both Bangladesh and Japan. This case study, with an inductive approach, allows an in-depth investigation of the subject matter that is crucial for attaining the research objectives. All the inputs have been exhaustively collected through document analysis. For gathering rigorous data regarding the issue, books, journal articles, different organizational reports, newspaper articles, national and international publications, and other recognized sources have been reviewed and cross-matched to ensure validity and acceptance. Extensive comparative analysis and discourse analysis have been utilized for a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings of the gathered information. During the whole process of this study, all the ethical norms and regulations have been maintained with utmost consciousness to produce universally acceptable and productive research. The research leaves scope to using primary data regarding the issue, which can help identify rigorous information about the Bangladeshi and Japanese women's perspectives to enhance their participation and effectiveness in the decision-making process. It highlighted the numerical data to represent the consequences that women are facing due to different challenges. Therefore, to mitigate these loopholes, this investigation has recommended a few necessary initiatives.

5. Findings

5.1 Political Backdrop of Female Politicians in Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi Constitution of 1972 was a historic landmark in the Indian subcontinent, acknowledging women's political involvement and recognizing

equal rights for women in both public and private domains. The constitution guarantees that women have the same rights as men and makes special provisions to ensure that disadvantaged groups in society have all the essential protections (Ahmed, 2008). However, the reality is quite different in Bangladesh, as women are not properly aware of their rights. Based on Bangladesh's social, economic, cultural, and religious landscape, several reasons and barriers can be identified that prevent women's active participation in politics. For instance, social biases, high campaign expenses, financial dependence, social and political violence, issues with religion, a lack of political education, situational hurdles, and attitudes based on gender roles and stereotypes are the major ones (Kalam, 2014; Panday, 2013). However, most Bangladeshi women are now not interested in pursuing a career in politics due to the dominating *Mastan* culture (Chowdhury, 2004; Chowdhury, 2009). Moreover, in doing so, at present, patriarchy is effectively strengthened even more than in the past. Bangladesh carries a tradition of a patriarchal familial political career, and the two female political leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, also have a family-rooted political background (Chowdhury, 2009; Panday & Li, 2014). Bangladeshi political tradition clarifies that the higher rank of a party introduces a lower number of women to participate (Panday, 2013).

The reserved seat system for females in the parliament of Bangladesh greatly encourages female politicians. On the contrary, this procedure makes female members of the parliament vulnerable as they face criticism about their capabilities. Reserved seat holders' presence in the parliament is regarded as an undiluted ornament of the parliament because their participation is not as effective as those who have been elected through elections (Chowdhury, 2009). Structural barriers continue to face women elected under the quota system, as they operate with less authority and funding than their male counterparts elected to general seats (Halder, 2004; Khan & Ara, 2023). On the other hand, if women want to take part in the elections, they require funding to run the election campaigns. However, Bangladeshi married women, in most cases, have no earnings as their in-laws do not allow them to get employed.

Consequently, financially vulnerable female politicians have no capital to invest in the elections (L. Karim, 2001). Therefore, they become highly dependent on their party, which may not always be fruitful. The BNP and AL have started two policy initiatives to increase women's participation in politics: increasing the proportion of female party officials and candidates and providing equal access to and backing for won seats. However, there has been little desire from the parties to see these improvements through (Ahmed, 2008).

Table 1: Percentage of females in the national parliament of Bangladesh

Duration of Parliament	Seats in the national parliament	Total female representatives in the parliament	Percentage of female ministers
1972-1975	315	15	4 %
1979-1981	330	32	3%
1982-1986	330	36	4.5%
1991-1996	330	33	7.7%
1996-2001	330	38	8.7%
2001-2006	345	52	5%
2009-2013	350	71	13.9%
2014-2018	350	73	19.7%
2019-Present	350	74	20.7%

Source: Panday & Li, 2014; Parvin, 2016; Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2019; Dutta & Khanom, 2021

Data presented in ‘Table 1’ reveals that women’s engagement in parliament is increasing in Bangladesh gradually. In the 2018 election, 53 million men and 52 million women cast ballots, with women making about 21% of parliamentarians overall, which was far lower a few decades ago compared to 50% of female voters (*11th Bangladesh National Election 2018 Results*, 2018). Therefore, the proportion of female political party members is rising. However, female activists are unable to advance through the ranks due to a lack of sufficient institutional knowledge and firsthand political experience, including funding and training. The educational attainment of women elected to local office has declined, with the majority finishing only up in middle schools (Dutta & Khanom, 2021). The progressing number of female parliament members, however, cannot represent the whole women population, particularly those living in rural areas.

Women’s rights, non-discrimination, and female empowerment are strongly supported by different self-governing feminist organizations, activists, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh. For instance, ‘Jatiya Mahila Sanshad’, ‘Women for Women’, ‘Naripokho’, ‘Bangladesh National Women’s Lawyer Association’, ‘Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha’, ‘Democracy Watch’, and ‘Khan Foundation’, etc. (Ahmed, 2008). These organizations are actively working for Bangladesh’s female rights, especially for their legal rights. Still, the women’s movement is under debate on whether it is effective in ensuring a better environment for female political leaders.

5.2 Political Backdrop of Female Politicians in Japan

From 1890 to the beginning of the 1920s, women were not allowed to participate in politics, and they could not vote till 1946 (Dalton, 2015). Japanese women afterward gained voting power through the Civil Code of 1947 (Kincaid, 2019). At present, Japan’s economic, social, and national prosperity cannot provide fertile land for political careers for Japanese women as the Japanese political sphere remains significantly dominated by male politicians. The leading political party of Japan, LDP, also differentiates between males and females as they formulate policies considering gender issues (Usui et al., 2003). For instance, the ‘Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field’ was enacted only in May 2018 (Nakamura et al., 2021).

Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe committed to increasing women’s participation in leadership positions to 30% by 2020 (Kakuchi, 2020). However, the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) Global Gender Gap report said that Japan is doing the worst in politics compared to other categories, such as education, economy, and health. Even though the Japanese economy is doing well, and women have access to good health care and a wide range of educational options, they are far behind in domestic politics. In 2022, Japan ranked 139 out of 146 countries in politics in the Global Gender Gap report (Nippon.com, 2022, July 15). The main reason for Japan’s remaining behind in the gender gap report in politics is the absence of women’s participation in national politics. Statistic data claims that Japan would require around 33.5 more years to equalize men’s and women’s participation in politics (Oi, 2021). The following data table shows male and female candidates’ participation in the Upper House (UH) election in Japan since 2010.

Table 2: Male-Female candidates in the Upper House elections of Japan

Election year	All candidates		Elected candidates	
	Total	Women	Seats contested	Women
2010	437	100	121	17 (14%)
2013	433	105	121	22 (18.2%)
2016	389	96	121	28 (23.1%)
2019	370	104	124	28 (22.6%)
2022	545	181	124	35 (28%)

Source: Sakakibara & Fujisaki, 2022; The Mainichi, 2022; Nippon.com, 2022, April 14

‘Table 2’ reflects a slightly progressing number of women involved in Japanese politics. Here, both the number of women running for office and the number of women who were elected went up. Currently, only 9.7% of Japanese women participate in the parliamentary member rank, whereas 10% serve as ministers

(Nippon.com, 2022, July 15). In 2022, only 35 women were elected to the UH of the National Diet of Japan, which represents only 28% of the UH (Nippon.com, 2022, April 14). However, female representation in the Lower House, the larger one of the bicameral Diet, remains at only around 10% as of 2022, where only 46 of the 461 total elected members were female (The House of Representatives, n.d.).

Noda Seiko is a well-known example of a successful female political leader in Japan with an effective political career that can inspire Japanese women in their journey. She has been elected nine times as a member of the House of Representatives in Japan, which is expressed as a record for a female politician (The Japan Times, 2020). At the beginning of her political career, she encouraged Japanese women to take part in politics. However, after getting married at 40 and having a baby at 50, she recommends that her fellow female politicians balance their political and familial lives. Being a woman is a disadvantage to building oneself as a politician in Japan (Dalton, 2019; Nippon.com, 2020). The 1947 Labor Standards Law in Japan was not extended to female parliamentarians. Therefore, in 2000, another popular Japanese female politician, Seiko Hashimoto, the first pregnant Upper House member, faced pressure to resign from male colleagues who believed her pregnancy would hinder her political performance. However, this incident sparked a discussion within the LDP, leading to an amendment of the Diet regulation law in March 2000, granting female parliamentarians the right to maternity leave (Eto, 2010). The lack of maternity leave policies in Japan's Parliament exemplifies a government unprepared for expectant mothers in politics, reflecting a male-defined mindset. More or less, every woman has to play their role as a wife and mother, whether they become successful in her career or not. Apart from familial duties, poor political support and election funding put fewer Japanese women in the political sector (Usui et al., 2003).

Another reason behind low female participation in politics is that many women are not interested in politics. Women feel that there is little chance of success for them, and it is also quite tough for a woman to improve her position or designation in the male-dominated political arena of Japan (Dalton, 2015; Pharr, 1981). There are two fundamental reasons for less women empowerment in Japanese society. One is the consecutive roles of both genders, males as earning members and females as household service providers in a family, and another reason is a male-dominated Japanese corporate culture (Broadbent, 2012; Ogasawara, 2023). These types of gender-based stratification indicate lowering the importance of a specific gender's role, female, by highlighting another male. There is a popular term, 'A Good Wife and A Wise Mother' or '*RYOSAI KENBO*' in Japanese society, which means that women have only the duty to work at home as good wives and become mothers and nothing more. These kinds of traditional beliefs dishonor female capacity and restrict their boundary simultaneously (Koyama, 2012). Besides, many women who join any office or corporate organization, even in politics, sometimes have to quit their jobs due to *SEKUHARA*, or sexual harassment, as it is a prevalent term in Japan (Dalton & Dalton, 2021).

Though feminist activists in Japan are actively working to increase the presence of women in society, their initiatives often start modestly and fizzle out shortly after (Kano, 2011). Given that the old electoral system did not adequately support women’s candidates, it is clear that a more women-friendly strategy is necessary to satisfy changing social expectations (Eto, 2010). A comparative study of three nations, including Japan, shows that gender awareness is changing. However, a sizable percentage of Japanese men and women still adhere to conventional norms, which hinders the country’s progress toward gender equality (Yen & Yang, 2011). However, the Japanese government now has plans to establish a technology-based human-centric society called ‘Society 5.0’, which aims to ensure gender equality in all stages of society (Parsons, 2022).

International initiatives, especially those spearheaded by the United Nations, have exerted influence on nations with poor female representation, leading Japan to pass quota rules. UN pressure and campaigning by Japanese women’s organizations led to the creation of the Protection Law against Domestic Violence and the Basic Law for Gender Equality in Society (BLGES) (Eto, 2010). The government of Japan has also begun to take initiatives, e.g., the “Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field,” to promote female participation in Japanese politics. For example, in 2014, Prime Minister Abe nominated five female ministers to the government. However, controversies forced two of the five women to quit in less than a month (ROIBU & CRUCIANU, 2016).

5.3 Comparison between Bangladesh and Japan

Without women’s proper representation in decision-making, no government can be considered truly democratic and representative. Political engagement generally refers to people’s actions intended to affect or support politics and the government. Political participation can be both conventional and unconventional.

Table 3: Japan and Bangladesh across four key dimensions

Pillars	Country	Rank	Score (0-1)
1. Economic Participation and Opportunity	Bangladesh	141	0.427
	Japan	121	0.564
2. Educational Attainment	Bangladesh	123	0.923
	Japan	1	1.000
3. Health and Survival	Bangladesh	129	0.962
	Japan	63	0.973
4. Political Empowerment	Bangladesh	9	0.546
	Japan	139	0.061

Source: Developed by the author based on WEF, 2022

To properly comprehend women's status in society, it is crucial to understand the socioeconomic situation of the nation first. 'Table 3' shows that Japan has higher scores in the first three dimensions, Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, and Health and Survival compared to Bangladesh, indicating that Japanese women are more likely to have the resources, opportunities, and support needed to participate in politics. On three key metrics of educational attainment—literacy and enrollment in primary and secondary education—Japan achieved parity. Japan dropped from 117th to 121st place in the economics category as a result of a number of issues, including a subpar overall record for wage equality for similar labor (Nippon.com, 2022). On the contrary, Bangladeshi women's workforce involvement status casts a position on the economic participation and opportunity sub-index, which is 141 among 146 countries. Economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment are all important factors influencing female political participation. Japan's higher scores in these dimensions suggest that Japanese women are more likely to be employed and have access to financial resources. Additionally, Japanese women are more likely to have a high level of education, which is crucial for their understanding and engagement in the political process. Health and survival are also important for female political participation, as they allow them to live long and healthy lives. Contradictorily, the political empowerment score in Japan is quite low for Japanese women, ranking 139th among 146 countries, compared to Bangladesh, ranking seventh globally, suggesting a lower level of involvement in politics in Japan despite having much of the necessary socioeconomic resources to do so. Bangladesh is far ahead of Japan in terms of political empowerment, even though it ranks behind Japan in the other three aspects. This inconsistency in the scoreboard is due to the low percentage of Japanese female representation as parliamentarians and ministers.

Table 4: Women in national parliaments in countries

Rank	Country	Percentage of women elected (2001-2004)	Percentage of women elected (2017-2020)
1	Rwanda	48.8	61.3
5	Sweden	45.3	47.3
76	USA	15	23.6
148	India	8.3	12.6
95	Bangladesh	2.0	20.7
164	Japan	7.1	10.2

Source: IPU – Inter-Parliamentary Union, The international organization of Parliaments of sovereign States (as of 2023)

The table shows that in Bangladesh, the percentage of women elected in the national parliament increased from 2.0% in 2001-2004 to 20.7% in 2017-2020. This is a remarkable increase of 18.7 percentage points. In Japan, the percentage of women elected in the national parliament increased from 7.1% in 2001-2004 to 10.2% in 2017-2020. This is an increase of 3.1 percentage points. While the percentage of women elected in the national parliament has increased in both Bangladesh and Japan, the increase in Bangladesh has been much more significant. This suggests that Bangladesh may be taking more active steps to promote women’s participation in politics. Bangladesh has made significant progress in increasing the representation of women in its national parliament. However, there is still room for further improvement. Japan, on the other hand, has made less progress in increasing the representation of women in its national parliament.

Despite having the most educated population in East Asia and the Pacific, Japan has a low score for gender parity in economic participation and opportunity, which is 56.4% (WEF, 2022). Japanese women are yet to make as much political progress as women in France, Britain, Canada, the United States, and other developed countries. The country has not welcomed any female prime minister in the past 50 years, and only 10.2% of women comprise the parliament (House of Representatives) as legislators. At the same time, the number of women in higher ranks in the corporate and bureaucratic sectors is quite low. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has ranked better in the global gender gap report 2022 (see Table 5) in the South Asian region. Since the birth of an independent Bangladesh, women have remained in the front row, sacrificing their lives, beloved ones, honor, and dignity for the sake of a free Bangladesh. Moreover, Bangladesh has been ruled under female leadership for the majority of its 50-year existence (Dutta & Khanom, 2021).

Table 5: Global Gender Gap Report, 2022

Rank in 2022	Country name	Score (0-1)
1	Iceland	0.908
22	Britain	0.780
25	Canada	0.772
27	The USA	0.769
71	Bangladesh	0.714
102	China	0.682
116	Japan	0.650
146	Afghanistan	0.435

Source: Nippon.com, 2022, July 15 & The Financial Express, 2022, July 14

Table 6: Comparative representation of Japan and Bangladesh in the regional and global contexts in terms of the Global Gender Gap Report, 2022.

Country	Rank		Score (0-1)
	Regional	Global	
Bangladesh	South Asia 1 st	71	0.714
Japan	East Asia and the Pacific 19 th	116	0.650

Source: Developed by the author based on WEF, 2022, p. 24

The condition of Japanese and Bangladeshi female politicians' engagement in the national parliament has been reflected in the latest global gender gap report of the year 2022 (Table 5) published by the WEF. It reveals that women are still not substantively involved in politics; instead, their representation is more numerical in Japan and Bangladesh. "Table" 6 conveys the status of Japan and Bangladesh from regional and global perspectives, suggesting that Bangladesh is doing very well in terms of mitigating the gender gap in its regional stage, compared to Japan, which lags significantly behind in its region. The WEF and its Global Gender Gap report also represent the disparity between men and women. In 2021, a report by the WEF revealed that Japan ranked 120 in gender parity out of 156 countries (Oi, 2021; Nippon.com, 2021). A year later, in 2022, Japan ranked 116 by upgrading four steps from 120 among 146 countries (Nippon.com, 2022, July 15). Japan's low global gender gap ranking is primarily attributable to the under representation of women in politics. In the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) ranking of female participation in national parliament, which includes 193 nations, the Lower House ranks 164th out of 193 countries due to the low percentage of female seats (Dalton, 2019). In a globally published report of IPU, 2019, Bangladesh has positioned 95th among 193 countries in female representation in the national parliament context (IPU, 2019). In Japan, women are not familiar with the vital posts in their workplace. The available literature shows, for instance, that only 1% or fewer than 1% of women are heads of an organization (Oi, 2021). In the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, Bangladesh ranked 71st among 146 countries, whereas it positioned 9th in the political index.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

The political landscape of women in Bangladesh and Japan is complex, with constitutional provisions supporting gender equality and women's political rights. However, barriers such as *Mastan* culture, patriarchal family traditions, and the family-rooted political background of prominent leaders hinder women's active political participation. The reserved seat system, while encouraging female politicians, subject them to criticism and limited authority: financial vulnerabilities and dependence on political parties for funding limit women's autonomy in political decision-making. Initiatives by major political parties to increase women's participation face challenges in implementation, and progress has been

slow. The discrepancy between the increasing number of female parliamentarians and the educational attainment of women elected to local office suggests a gap in institutional knowledge and training. The effectiveness of the women's movement in fostering a conducive environment for female political leaders remains a topic of debate. Comparatively, Bangladesh seems to be making more substantial progress in increasing female representation in politics than Japan. The findings suggest that gender-aware policies, initiatives by political parties, and sustained efforts by feminist organizations play pivotal roles in shaping the landscape of women's political participation in these countries.

Women comprise around half of the total population of both Japan and Bangladesh. So, female participation or practice of politics can bring change in the political environment and can extensively modify contemporary political agendas. Inclusive representation, as a result, of women in both local and national government and higher administrative positions will lead the governments of Japan and Bangladesh to be more representative and transparent to their citizens. Besides, the governing bodies are more proactive in promoting women's empowerment in their societies in both countries. There is a need to increase the number of women holding political office at both the local and national levels to provide Bangladeshi and Japanese women a voice in the decision-making process. The selection of educational paths and professional courses continues to be significantly influenced by societal expectations, workplace rules, the legal system, and the accessibility of care in both Bangladeshi and Japanese society.

Various interconnected factors have collectively impacted fewer female representatives in the parliament in both countries, such as the traditional assumption of gender roles in society, male-dominated political systems, self-motivation and support from society, financial dependency, educational awareness about politics, political party support, and motherhood. It makes it unlikely that one factor alone may explain the primary cause of women's under representation. Japanese still holds some degree of gender-based stratification. Most Japanese women face problems with maintaining their professional and family life. Though The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOC) enacted in 1986 promotes a well-balanced workplace for Japanese men and women, it fails to address the issue of traditional gender-based social roles. Japan has yet to establish equal political representation for females, whereas many developing countries, such as Bangladesh, have done so much better.

The existing social discriminatory norms, as discovered through this research, in Japan and Bangladesh may often restrict women from raising their voices against injustice and violence. In both societies, families treat male and female children differently. So, as a core entity of society, a family must play a vital role in breaking the disparity of gender issues. Society still holds the pre-modern point of view about women, which is not just a societal thought process about women; this is also due to women's silence about injustice. Initiatives must be taken so that women feel hesitant or shy

to express themselves. Women must start raising their voices against any injustice and misrepresentation in any sphere of society to come out of the social boundaries.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges the significance of women's empowerment on a global scale. The international community has committed to achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, including Goal 5, calling for gender equality and the empowerment of all women. Achieving women's political participation requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses legal and cultural barriers, provides support and resources, and empowers women within political structures. In light of the information and understandings gathered through this research, a number of measures are being recommended that can stimulate political participation both in Japan and Bangladesh:

1. **Traditional Gender Roles:** The key obstacle to women's empowerment is the traditional mindset about gender roles. Society must come out of its assumptions of traditional gender-based roles. Education and awareness campaigns can challenge traditional gender roles and promote positive attitudes towards women's political participation. This requires long-term efforts in both formal and informal settings, including schools, media, and community organizations.
2. **Institutional reform:** Implementing quotas or reserved seats for women, which have already been very successful in Bangladesh, both in local and national government, should be preserved until required. This can significantly increase women's representation in political bodies. Electoral systems can be reformed, e.g., proportional representation, gender-neutral campaign financing, etc., to address gender bias and ensure fair representation.
3. **Motherhood:** Aside from other general duties, childbirth is an added responsibility for women and an integral natural activity for human survival. Therefore, the social and political structure must absorb childbirth and motherhood into the system by providing motherhood leaves, work-from-home facilities, flexible working hours, easing of responsibilities, etc., during the childbirth period. This will allow women to overcome the fear of losing employment or institutional positions due to childbirth and allow them to continue their work when the childbirth period is over.
4. **Political Party Initiatives:** The leading political parties of both countries must take measurable initiatives, such as a female nomination quota, motherhood, and pregnancy support, to attract more female activists and create an environment that is conducive to women's participation and contribution to domestic and international politics.
5. **Participation in the System:** Encourage women to take administrative positions. According to Western scholars, feminist bureaucrats operating

inside the state apparatus or the state itself, by adopting women's demands, may advance women's positions and promote women's rights.

6. **A National Issue:** People should be aware that women's participation in politics is not a women's issue. Instead, it is a national issue that directly involves half of the population and impacts the whole nation.
7. **Women for Women:** Women already in positions of power in both countries should come forward to encourage and make way for newcomers to join the workforce and political force. They should work to make the process of entrance of a newcomer into the system easier, which will encourage more women to participate in national politics.
8. **Social capital Accumulation for Women:** Like male members of society, women should also be able to take part in social activities, e.g., connecting, communicating, bonding, bridging, etc., in all spheres of society and arranging training programs, workshops, career advancement seminars, internships, and volunteering activities for women by using those resources to make women aware of their rights.

Achieving gender equality in political participation requires guided, long-term approaches that combine the development of all the other aspects related to women's empowerment, including social, cultural, economic, and political factors. It requires the cooperation and combined effort of the whole nation so that women may feel welcomed and motivated to participate in politics at local and national levels.

7. Conclusion

Human beings should be treated according to their excellence, intellectuality, educational qualification, and capability rather than their gender or sexual identity. Irrespective of social status, nationality, religion, color, or wealth_ everyone should respect women. Moreover, the term 'women's strategic needs' refers to providing women with more negotiating power, less violence against them, and more participation in decision-making. The government needs to train people to be leaders, give them different kinds of opportunities, and have a plan for developing their staff. Besides, introducing mentorships, guidance, sponsorships, etc., for women might help qualified women to raise their visibility in politics. Bangladesh and Japan face contrasting challenges in women's political participation despite constitutional support for gender equality. Challenges like male-dominated culture, patriarchal family traditions, lack of incentives, and gender stereotypes are significant ones. Major political parties face challenges in increasing women's participation, with a gap in institutional knowledge and training. Government initiatives and the women's movement's effectiveness in fostering a conducive environment for female political leaders remain debatable. However, Bangladesh is making more substantial progress in increasing female representation than Japan. While the specific challenges faced by women in Japan and Bangladesh

may differ, the underlying principles for promoting their political participation remain the same. By acknowledging the diverse obstacles and implementing a comprehensive set of solutions, these countries can move towards a more inclusive and equitable political landscape. Further research can be conducted on political awareness among women, female social capital development, and the particular factors identified in this research that shape women's participation in politics.

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