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Challenges of Bangladeshi Women Working in the National Security Institutions

ABSTRACT. This study attempts to find out the challenges faced by the Bangladeshi women serving in the national security institutions from three broad spheres. Furthermore, it explains the challenges based on the liberal feminist theory, which talks about gender equality in the workplace and society. This paper critically analyzes the masculine nature of the security institutions and the existing gender power disparities within these institutions in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS: masculinity, militarization, national security institutions, gender perspective, Bangladesh

Introduction

Gender is a socially constructed identity where masculinity has privilege over femininity. Historically, masculinity has been dominating over femininity in the societal structure and institutions. Therefore, women in society still must face various challenges. The gender-stereotyped fixed roles for women do not allow and often discourage performing certain activities and serving in certain job sectors. "Historically gender power imbalances rooted in society, and it could also be found in military and police institutions" (Karim & Beardsley, 2017, p. 194). Therefore, it can be stated that the Military and Police are gendered institutions hence gender power imbalances are seen in the highest form within these institutions. Thus, it is certain that women face challenges while serving in these institutions. The percentage of male serving in the Bangladesh Army is higher than any other public services in Bangladesh. Therefore, the proportion of female serving in the Bangladesh Army is the lowest (Mouri, n.d.). Like the other military and police organizations of the world, the functions of security institutions in Bangladesh are shaped by gender power imbalances. Not only the institutions but also the traditional societal, cultural, and religious

norms in Bangladesh do not support the engagement of female in the security institutions as it is believed activities associated with these institutions are only for men. In addition, there is a lack of understanding of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 at the national level hence there is no national action plan or policy to implement it efficiently. To recruit more competent Bangladeshi females into the national security institutions, the challenges they face must be identified, acknowledged, and addressed appropriately through both policy and institutional level. It is important to find out the challenges as the security sectors would require more female security personnel to deal with the multidimensional and complex security issues in the future. Given the contexts mentioned above, this study aims to find out the fundamental impediments faced by the Bangladeshi women serving in the national security institutions. This research followed an interpretive method by using qualitative research on collecting and analyzing data. Overall, a policy-oriented desk research method has been followed to conduct this research. For collecting qualitative data and related information, secondary sources of data collection such as books, journal articles, newspapers, policy and strategy papers, websites, government reports were reviewed. Liberal feminism has been used as the theoretical framework to comprehend the challenges, underrepresentation, and exclusion of women in security institutions.

Challenges from National Security Institutions

Military culture and organization are male-dominated and therefore increased presence and inclusive participation of women in the military pose challenges to its culture in different ways (Davis, 2009). According to Beardsley and Karim (2017), the major challenges for women have its root in the hierarchical gender power structures and relations in their respective national security institutions. Thus, it can be said that security institutions are gendered (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). It is no different in the case of Bangladesh since its security institutions are also male-dominated and thus its rules, customs and practices are influenced by gendered norms and culture. In the security sector, national military and police organizations are known as the formal institutions and in most cases, historically these institutions are created by men (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Beardsley and Karim (2017, p. 29) describe the institutions in their writing as "institutions are social creations, which means that their rules, practic-

es, and customs reflect the preferences and values of those who created them." In the writing of Beardsley and Karim (2017, p. 183–189), Louise Chappell (2010) explains "gender is embedded in institutions through ongoing practices, values, and expectations of appropriate behaviour and that institutional rules and norms privilege certain forms of behaviour and certain actors over others." Nurturing and caring are the works that have been associated with women traditionally and historically, whereas works involving rationality and authority have been assigned to men (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Therefore, the idea of men in the dominant position and women in the subordinate position has been historically and traditionally incorporated in the organizations (i.e., military and police institutions) established by men where hegemonic masculinity is prevalent.

According to Beardsley and Karim (2017, p. 30), the reason behind gender power disparities within security sectors can be explained by three processes which are—"the idealization of warrior identity, the emergence of a gendered protection norm, and the pursuit of militarized cohesion."

Challenges faced by the Bangladeshi female personnel from their respective security institutions can be identified in different spheres which are described below:

▪ **Challenges from Policy and Doctrine:** Claire Duncanson (2013) in the writing of Beardsley and Karim (2017, p. 32) argued that "the dominance of warrior masculinity shapes policy priorities, privileging combat over other activities that may be better for those on the ground." Therefore, politicians are prone to spend more on the military to respond to any threats involving force, referred to as "manly" (Karim & Beardsley, 2017, p. 32). Such idealization in institutional, policy, and doctrinal level influence the recruitment and selection process where less manly attributes are unfit to serve in military and police or in the areas of these institutions. For example, in Bangladesh Army, female officers are not recruited in the Armored Corps and Infantry Regiment. Furthermore, there is no existing national framework or policy to implement and integrate the Women, Peace and Security agendas at both national policy and institutional level up till now. Colonel Mustafizur Rahman, Senior Instructor at Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT) said in the interview with the author that a draft of National Action Plan (NAP) had been finalized, but it is yet to be approved. In an interview with the author, Lt Col Md. Rabiul Alam (Retd), Associate Professor and Chairman, Department of International Relations, Bangladesh University of Professionals said that the Bangladesh Armed Forces have no such concrete policy or doctrine

to increase the number of female personnel in their respective forces. It is worth mentioning that female recruitment in the Bangladesh Armed Forces as regular recruits in the Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA) long course as officers have only begun in 2000 from the 47th BMA long course. On the other hand, female soldiers are started being recruited very recently. However, female soldiers are not eligible to participate in UN peacekeeping missions. Therefore, the participation of female military personnel in UN peacekeeping missions is comparatively much lower than female police personnel. Furthermore, Bangladesh Police has its own Female Police unit, whereas Bangladesh Armed Forces do not have such a unit. Contingent troops in UN peace operations are mostly comprised of Artillery and Infantry units. Therefore, women get fewer chances of going to UN peacekeeping missions since they have very few representations in these units. There is no such policy or doctrine to make inclusion or increase the number of females in these units. Unlike Bangladesh Armed Forces, Police Headquarters and Bangladesh Policewomen Network (BPWN) have taken initiatives through policy and actions to increase the effective participation of women in the Police force. Therefore, an All Women Armed Police Battalion (APBn) was established as the 11th battalion of its force on 21 June 2011 (Basak, 2018). Moreover, "gender neutrality" was identified as the core value for the Strategic Plan of 2008–2010, where women police and gender equality were taken as the strategic direction to develop a gender policy as well as to increase the representation of women in Bangladesh Police force (Basak, 2018, p. 191). Therefore, the number of women in the Bangladesh Police has doubled from 2007 (1.87 per cent) to 2013 (4.63 per cent) (Basak, 2018). Other than the warrior identity, the idea of protection norm also creates a challenge at the policy and doctrinal formulation. The norm to protect women, together with the fear of facing political backlash for sending women to dangerous peacekeeping missions, often influences policymakers to be reluctant to send women in large number to these missions (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). The highest-ranked female officer in Bangladesh Armed Forces is Dr Susane Giti, who became the first female officer in the Bangladesh Army to be promoted as Major General in 2018 (bdnewsnet.com, 2018). Therefore, it is apparent that only a handful of female officers are at the highest ranks of the military, which results in fewer participation in decision-making and policy formulation. The situation in Bangladesh Police is the same where policies regarding recruitment, training and transfer are not gendered sensitive (Basak, 2018). According to Basak (2018, p. 197), "65.3 per cent male police officers and

58.9 per cent female police officers agree that there is a lack of adequate thana-level station facilities for female officers."

▪ **Challenges from Training:** To ensure operational effectiveness, the military generates and supports the dichotomies of masculinity and femininity to support military culture (Davis, 2009). Likewise, to sustain military culture and operational effectiveness such tendencies of maintaining differences between masculinity and femininity are practiced in the military training as well. Therefore, in a military setting, women continuously must negotiate their identities (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Consequently, "more often than not, military women tend to be subject to discrimination in their military careers, passed over for promotions and opportunities—including deployments in Peacekeeping Operations—or assigned to menial tasks that do not correspond with their training" (UN Women, 2015 cited in Karim & Beardsley, 2017, p. 33). The militarization process which begins from the training period is another reason behind the gender power dichotomies in the security institutions (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). The process of militarization creates "in-group" and "out-group" to be effective in the combat which is achieved through cohesiveness of the men in the in-group by strengthening their bonds (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). That sense of cohesion which motivates the soldiers to fight together is created and sustained through cultivating shared masculinity in the training period, and subsequently cherished throughout a soldier's military career (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Anything outside the understanding of militarized masculinity is deemed as feminine, and thus Ann Tickner (1992, 2001) in the writing of Beardsley and Karim (2017) has criticized militarization by arguing that promoting a culture of militarism is done by devaluing femininity. A certain form of training is followed in the military academies where men are socialized to become militarized as well as to develop military effectiveness through emphasizing on certain characteristics such as "toughness; rationality; discipline; patriotism; courage; endurance; avoidance of fear, uncertainty, guilt and remorse; and heterosexuality" (Whitworth, 2007; Woodward and Winter, 2007 cited in Karim & Beardsley, 2017, p. 39). In interviews with former female military cadets from Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA), above-mentioned militarization process based on militarized masculinity is found. Amina Alam, a former BMA female officer cadet from 75 BMALC said in an interview that during their military training period at BMA the female cadets were often given instructions like "don't show that you are a lady"; "be always prepared like a male"; "you shouldn't look pretty." She further added that

she felt like during her training that her female identity is being surpassed. In addition, the female cadets are trained to be loud, rude, tough, and instructed not to laugh to deal with soldiers. By evaluating these examples of training method and instructions it can be easily understood that these are following the idea of militarized masculinity to build military culture. Furthermore, training uniforms and equipment used at BMA are the same for both male and female cadets and as a result, it causes physical harm to the female cadets due to their biological constraints. For this reason, many female officer cadets suffer from physical injury and often cannot continue their further military training. Therefore, it can be said that while military academy or institution claim themselves as gender-neutral nevertheless, they follow militarized masculinity in their training programs. Besides, they do not take the feminine traits, requirements, and identity into account in their military culture and training program. Moreover, they fear if those are allowed then their in-group cohesion within the military will be destroyed therefore it is evident that the militarization process systematically excludes women (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Subsequently, after getting commissioned as the officer, the female military officers still must go through military culture and training programs dominated by the militarized masculinity. According to Mouri (n.d.), the male officers are less cooperative during the in-service training towards their female colleagues. Furthermore, she gave example in her writing that in DSCSC-39 course each syndicate consisted of only one female and ten males where the female faced less cooperation from her male syndicate members (Mouri, n.d.). In the survey conducted by Mouri (n.d., p. 48) shows that "78.57 per cent female officers and 60.64 per cent male officers from Bangladesh Armed Forces agree that the training environment in various military schools including DSCSC is not favorable for female officers." After reviewing the websites and courses offered by the major training institutes of Bangladesh Armed Forces such as Defence Services Command & Staff College (DSCSC), National Defence College (NDC) and Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT), it can be identified that none of these institutions except BIPSOT offer gender-related courses. The gender-related course is also absent in the training module for the officer cadets. The grooming process is sometimes gendered biased at BMA which is confirmed from the interviews with the former BMA cadets. BIPSOT, a premium institute of Bangladesh to train the peacekeepers, offers Women, Peace and Security (WPSC) Course as part of pre-deployment training which is a five days long residential course. Additionally, it also offers Con-

flict Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) Course to the potential peacekeepers (Courses at BIPSOT – BIPSOT, 2019). On the other hand, Bangladesh Police Academy offers a fifteen days long Course of Reproductive Health and Gender Issue as a specialized course although they do not have any separate training institute like BIPSOT for peacekeepers from Bangladesh Police (Offered Courses Bangladesh Police Academy, 2019). The police culture and training are also dominated by the male-dominated culture like military institutions (Basak, 2018). Basak (2018) further argues that training on gender awareness in Bangladesh police is not enough.

▪ **Challenges from Institutional Culture and Practice:** Mouri (n.d.) argues that there is a lack of congenial interpersonal relationship between male and female officers in Bangladesh Army which creates lack of confidence, trust, and understandings between themselves in their working environment. Therefore, such a working environment within the institution creates impediments for female officers to work efficiently since they are less in number and underrepresented. Army Headquarter (AHQ) project study (2014 cited in Mouri, n.d.) showed that "49 per cent Commanding Officers (COs) are facing difficulties regarding the female officers conduct." COs are less confident about assigning tasks to female officers and sometimes they assign a junior commissioned officer as acting company commander rather than assigning the duty to a female officer (Mouri, n.d.). Female officers often receive negative attitudes and sometimes come across bad comments and criticism from their male colleagues (Mouri, n.d.). Since the importance of gender perspective and sensitivity are not being taught to the military officers at the military academy or in during other basic training, therefore, male officers are not aware of the female gender role and perspective in the military. One of the male responders in the writing of Mouri (n.d., p. 44) responded that "female officers should not be treated as a female rather they should be addressed as officers; it will solve many of the issues." For this type of ignorance and misunderstanding about gender perspective among the male officers, it becomes extremely challenging for the female officers in Bangladesh Armed Forces to demonstrate their leadership role (Mouri, n.d.). Gender blindness and discriminatory attitudes are also found in Bangladesh Police Force where sometimes male police officers show discriminatory remarks, attitudes, and behaviour to their female colleagues (Basak, 2018). In addition, there are not enough facilities such as transport, accommodation, washroom, daycare centres for children, and moreover, there is an absence of supporting working environment for female personnel in Bangladesh Police

(Basak, 2018). Additional SP Joyita Shilpi who went to UN Peace Operation in 2013 as a Platoon Commander told in an interview that male officers in Bangladesh Police often think that female officers are less qualified and sometimes Officer in Charge (OC) cannot accept the leadership of a female officer. Therefore, female officers are less interested in field job and more interested in the desk job at the Police HQ. Shipli further mentioned that at present there are only two female officers are being appointed as SP, one in Jhalokati and another one in Gazipur. Up till now, there have been only 70 female SP served in Bangladesh Police and there have been only 60 female Addl. Deputy Inspector General (BPWN, 2019). According to BPWN website at present, the percentage of female officers serving in Bangladesh Police is 7.10 per cent and the percentage of cadre officials is 10.26 per cent (BPWN, 2019).

Conclusion

In recent times, Bangladesh has achieved significant success in advancing women's rights. Therefore, women's participation in economic activities through joining in industrial and manufacturing sectors has increased in good proportion. However, in terms of joining and working in the security sector, Bangladeshi female still face challenges since this sector is highly male dominated. Therefore, the number of women working in the security sector is low. Less representation of women in the domestic forces creates impediments to contribute female peacekeepers in UN missions. Therefore, Bangladesh might fail to meet the certain proportion of female peacekeepers demanded by UN to send to UN peace operations. Inclusion of women in the security sector faces challenges from national culture, religion and society, national policies along from national security institutions itself. A gender-biased preconceived notion of understanding gender role plays the major part in all the above-mentioned spheres of Bangladesh which create challenges for Bangladeshi women to join and work in the National Security Institutions. To tackle these challenges and to achieve success a systemic change is required not only in security institutions but also in the society, work, and policy level. Gender mainstreaming and sensitivity must be incorporated not only at the policy level but also in the military academy, training institutions and military culture etc.

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