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RESEARCH PAPER

The Gender Paradox of Revolution: Women's Mobilisation in Bangladesh's July Uprising and Gendered Conversion Failure in Post-Uprising Party Politics

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ABSTRACT
This article explains why women's mobilisation in Bangladesh's July uprising failed to yield institutional power in national party politics through the post-election transition. Women led early protests and faced targeted repression. Yet the subsequent national election returned very few directly elected women. Existing accounts describe this paradox but not its mechanism. Grounded in feminist institutionalism, this qualitative study examines the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, the National Citizen Party and transitional institutions. It combines critical visual analysis of the uprising's archive, feminist discourse and frame analysis of the July Charter and party texts, and theory-testing process tracing of nominations, appointments and party rules. Iconic inclusion rendered women symbols rather than leaders. Discursive repositioning recast them as protected citizens rather than political agents. Institutional filtering through voluntary targets, reserved seats and kinship produced exclusion. Nomination quotas for women should be legally binding. Reserved seats should be directly elected and kept separate from nomination quotas.

KEYWORDS Gender and Revolution, Feminist Institutionalism, Candidate Selection, Process Tracing, Bangladesh, July Uprising, Women's Political Representation

Introduction

On the night of 14 July 2024, residents of the women's halls at the University of Dhaka broke the locks on their hall gates and marched onto the campus, turning a dispute over civil service quotas into the opening act of a national uprising (Mizan, 2024). Three weeks later Sheikh Hasina's government fell. The United Nations fact-finding mission later confirmed that women and girls had been at the forefront of the early protests, and that security forces and ruling-party supporters had used gender-based violence specifically to deter women's participation and undermine female leadership (OHCHR, 2025).

Eighteen months later, the political settlement looked very different. Of roughly 2,000 candidates in the February 2026 parliamentary election, about 4% were women (UNB, 2026a; Dhaka Courier, 2026). Only seven women won general seats, all but one from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), equalling the low point last seen in 2001 (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2026a). Only three of the 49 ministers and state ministers in the new cabinet were women, compared with eight in the previous cabinet (bdnews24.com, 2026a). The second-largest party, Jamaat-e-Islami, nominated no women for general seats, and its leader stated that a woman could never head the party (*The Financial Express*, 2026). By then, several women prominent in the movement had left its

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organisations or quit politics, citing marginalisation, pressure and harassment (*Dawn*, 2025; *The Financial Express*, 2025).

This sequence of prominent mobilisation followed by institutional marginalisation is not unique to Bangladesh. Comparative scholarship has documented it from Nicaragua to Tunisia and Egypt (Hafez, 2014; Khalil, 2014; Molyneux, 1985). What remains under-specified is the mechanism that links the two moments. Existing accounts tend either to describe the outcome, attributing it broadly to patriarchy or Islamist resurgence, or to explain it through a shortage of women aspirants. Neither shows how, step by step, the political capital women accumulated in the streets was devalued before it could be exchanged for institutional power.

This article addresses that gap by asking why, and through what mechanisms, women's prominent mobilisation in Bangladesh's July Uprising failed to translate into institutional power and representation in post-uprising party politics. To answer this question, it examines how women's agency was represented in the visual and documentary archive of the uprising; how the texts of the transition, from the July National Charter and reform commission records to party manifestos and leaders' statements, framed women's political role; and which formal and informal party rules filtered women out of candidacies and leadership, and whether these rules explain the outcome better than rival explanations. Correspondingly, the article aims to reconstruct women's agency from contemporaneous evidence, to trace their discursive repositioning during transitional bargaining, to identify the institutional mechanisms of exclusion, and to theorise the resulting pattern as a mechanism that can travel to other transitions.

The article argues that the outcome is best understood as gendered conversion failure. Women's mobilisational capital was devalued in three linked stages. First, *iconic inclusion* during the uprising made women visible as symbols of moral courage rather than as strategists or leaders. Second, *discursive repositioning* during transitional bargaining reframed women from political agents into protected citizens whose representation was a matter for others to decide. Third, *institutional filtering* through centralised candidate selection, kinship-based recruitment and the channelling of women into nominated reserved seats converted those framings into exclusion. Each stage made the next more likely, and each was reinforced by informal institutions that the uprising had disrupted but not displaced. The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it offers one of the first systematic, theory-driven accounts of the gender politics of Bangladesh's 2024–26 transition. Theoretically, it links the literature on gender and revolution with feminist institutionalist work on candidate selection, and extends Mackay's (2014) concept of nested newness to revolutionary junctures. Methodologically, it shows how visual, discursive and institutional evidence can be integrated within a single process-tracing design without retrospective interviews. The article proceeds through the literature, theoretical framework, research design and context, three empirical sections, a Discussion, a Conclusion and Recommendations.

Literature Review

Women in revolutions and the paradox of mobilisation

That women's participation in revolutions rarely produces commensurate gains is one of the most durable findings in feminist political science. Molyneux's (1985) study of Sandinista Nicaragua framed the problem as mobilisation without emancipation, distinguishing women's practical interests, which revolutionary states could

accommodate, from strategic gender interests, which they subordinated to the wider revolutionary project. Comparative work extended the finding to democratic transitions, showing that the return of party competition frequently displaces the women's organisations that had sustained opposition under authoritarian rule (Waylen, 2007).

The Arab uprisings of 2011 renewed this debate. Khalil (2014) named a gender paradox in which revolutionary moments simultaneously open and foreclose possibilities for women, and Hafez (2014) showed how women's bodies became the terrain on which Islamist, military and secular-nationalist projects contested the meaning of the Egyptian revolution. Mako and Moghadam (2021) argue that the prior strength of autonomous women's organising helps explain why Tunisia's transition proved more durable. Cross-national work adds a qualification. Viterna and Fallon (2008) argue that democratisation produces gender-equitable states only under specific conditions: completed transitions, cohesive women's coalitions, a legacy of gender-bending activism and supportive ideological openings; and Fallon et al. (2012) find that women's legislative representation often *falls* immediately after democratisation before recovering, a pattern they call the democracy paradox. This literature establishes that marginalisation after mobilisation is common. It is less precise about the intervening process within particular cases.

Gender, institutions and candidate selection

Feminist institutionalism offers tools for examining that process. It treats political institutions as gendered: formal and informal rules prescribe and proscribe gendered behaviour, and gendered *logics of appropriateness* shape which actors are seen as legitimate (Chappell, 2006; Mackay et al., 2010). Particular attention is paid to informal institutions, the unwritten rules that may reinforce, compete with or undermine formal ones (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Waylen, 2014).

Candidate selection has become a central site for this research. Moving beyond the supply-and-demand model of recruitment, Krook (2010) showed how systemic, practical and normative institutions combine to shape women's chances of selection. Bjarnegård (2013) demonstrated how male homosocial networks and clientelist resources sustain male dominance where formal rules appear neutral. Kenny (2013) and Bjarnegård and Kenny (2016) showed that selection processes, often opaque and leader-controlled, are where informal rules are most consequential and least visible, and Kenny and Verge (2016) emphasise that centralised selection can advance or obstruct women depending on elites' willingness to promote equality.

Most relevant here is Mackay's (2014) concept of **nested newness**. New institutions are embedded in older institutional environments, and gender reforms within them remain vulnerable to regress as actors *remember the old* masculinised rules and *forget the new* gendered ones. Mackay developed the concept from post-devolution Scotland, a best-case setting for reform. Its application to revolutionary junctures in the Global South, where newness is more abrupt and contested, remains largely unexplored.

Women's political representation in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is another paradox in itself: decades in which women were both in government and in opposition, alongside low representation of women in elected office. However, research on quotas, primarily in local government, reveals that the use of reserved seats has typically resulted in representation but not participation, and that

women have been left at the mercy of male party leaders (Panday, 2008). Saikia (2011) reveals that the memory of women's role in the Liberation War has been filtered through the prism of victimhood, and Shehabuddin (2008) demonstrates how Islamist parties have been using women as voters and workers while limiting their leadership. The 2024 uprising has generated a fast-growing literature, but most published work so far consists of policy commentary and early analyses of its causes and of the role of civil society. Gendered analysis remains scattered across journalism, seminar reports and activist commentary, including scholarly discussion of gender and masculinity in the uprising's graffiti (University of Dhaka, 2025) and reporting on the marginalisation of women activists (*The Daily Star*, 2024a, 2024b).

Three gaps follow. First, the international literature on gender and revolution has identified the paradox but not specified the within-case mechanism that connects mobilisation to marginalisation. Second, feminist institutionalism has developed strong tools for analysing candidate selection and nested newness, but has rarely applied them to revolutionary transitions in South Asia. Third, to our knowledge, no peer-reviewed study has systematically analysed the gender politics of Bangladesh's 2024–26 transition from the uprising through to the composition of the new parliament. This article addresses all three.

Theoretical Framework: Gendered Conversion Failure

Mobilisational capital and institutional capital

Participation in a successful uprising generates mobilisational capital: visibility, moral credit, networks and a claim to a voice in the new order. Institutional power in a party democracy is denominated in a different currency. Institutional capital consists of nominations, party offices, ministerial posts and a place in the forums where new rules are written. Revolutionary transitions require one kind of capital to be converted into the other, on terms set by those who control the transition's institutions.

Gendered conversion failure occurs when the exchange rate is systematically worse for women than for men holding comparable mobilisational capital. It does not require that women be absent from the uprising or lack ambition or qualifications, only that the processes governing conversion devalue women's claims at each step. The concept shifts attention from *whether* women participated, which is rarely in doubt, to *how* their participation was priced.

A three-stage mechanism

The article theorises conversion failure as three linked stages, each corresponding to a distinct arena and type of evidence (Figure 1).

1. Iconic inclusion (the mobilisation arena). Women become highly visible, but primarily as symbols of courage, sacrifice or victimhood rather than as strategists or leaders. Iconic inclusion confers recognition without authority and sets a representational template: women as the conscience of the revolution rather than its architects.

2. Discursive repositioning (the bargaining arena). The texts that define the new order reframe women from subjects who claim power into objects whose protection and representation are decided by others. Following Lazar (2007) and

Verloo (2007), this can be traced in the grammar of agency, in how gender equality is framed as a problem, and in whose voice is included.

3. Institutional filtering (the party arena). Formal and informal party rules convert those framings into outcomes. Centralised nomination, kinship networks, channelling into appointed reserved seats and segregation into auxiliary wings act as filters that pass men's mobilisational capital and block women's (Bjarnegård, 2013; Krook, 2010).

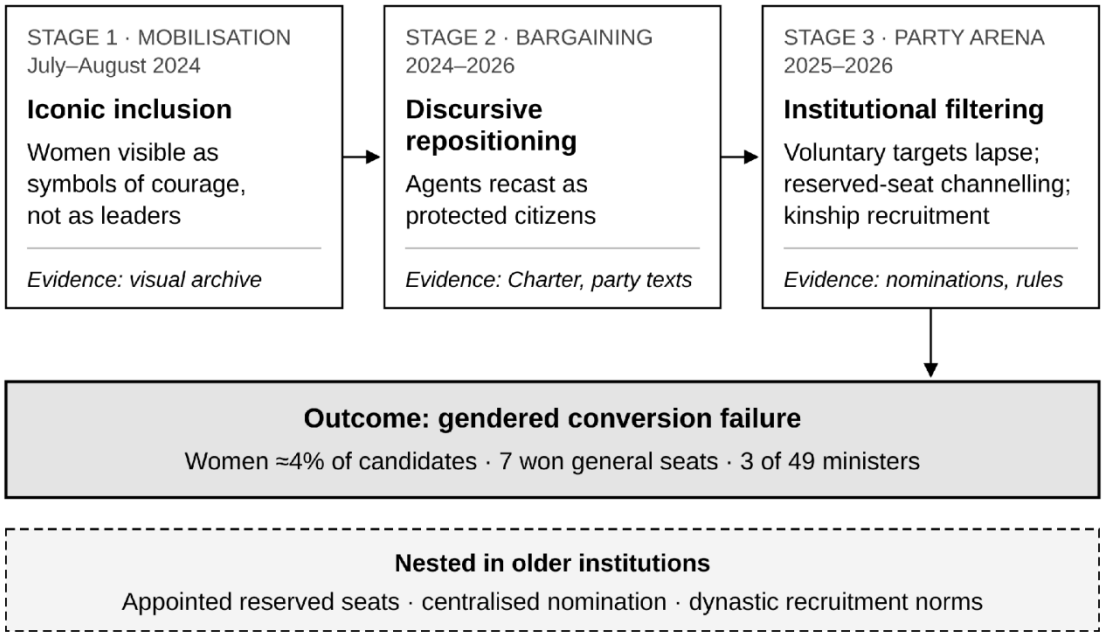


Figure 1. The mechanism of gendered conversion failure. Each stage is traced with a different strand of evidence, and all three are nested in older recruitment institutions.

The stages are not only sequential, but cumulative as well. In the symbolic sense of the term iconicity, discursive repositioning is made possible by the fact that women are already represented in the record as symbols rather than as leaders. Discursive repositioning validates institutional filtering because it implies that if women must be protected, they are not being discriminated against by not being able to run for office. But the mechanism works both formally and informally: unwritten rules about who is a 'credible candidate', who has 'credible networks' and what kinds of political 'credit' can be redeemed are as important as charters and electoral laws.

Propositions and rival explanations

This institutional dynamic, traversing informal institutions within the new order, is the basis for the marginalisation of women in post-uprising party politics, the main tenet of the argument presented. It is compared with four alternative explanations: a shortage of qualified or willing women, a compositional effect due to the exclusion of the Awami League from the election, an Islamist blockage of women's leadership, and a generic newcomer disadvantage that applies to all movement activists, irrespective of gender. If any of these could account for the evidence in isolation, there would be no need for the proposition; and each suggests observable patterns which are inconsistent with the central proposition.

Material and Methods

An integrated qualitative design

The study uses an integrated qualitative research design with theory-testing process tracing as the explanatory thread. The earlier stages are covered by critical visual analysis and feminist critical discourse/framing analysis. The strands are not parallel techniques applied to different questions, but each produces the observable implications of one stage, and process tracing tests whether the stages link as theorised, and whether other competing explanations fit the evidence better (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Table 1 links each stage to its analytical focus, method and evidence.

Table 1
Integrated research design

Stage	Analytical focus	Method	Primary evidence
Iconic inclusion (July–August 2024)	How women's agency was represented in the uprising	Critical visual analysis (Rose, 2016)	Protest images, graffiti and murals documented in the press and university records; contemporaneous reporting; UN fact-finding report
Discursive repositioning (August 2024–February 2026)	How transitional texts framed women's political role	Feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007); critical frame analysis (Verloo, 2007)	July National Charter; consensus and reform commission records; party manifestos and constitutions; leaders' statements
Institutional filtering (2025–2026)	Which party rules filtered women out, compared with rival explanations	Theory-testing process tracing (Fairfield & Charman, 2017; Mahoney, 2012)	Nomination and Election Commission data; reserved-seat allocations; cabinet composition; party committee announcements

Data corpus and analytical procedures

The corpus is restricted to authentic, publicly available and verifiable sources: official documents, party documents and recorded statements, visual materials documented in the press and university records, and established news outlets used as records of events. Where sources report different figures for the same quantity, as with women candidates at different stages of nomination, the range and its sources are reported. Social media material is used only where reported by an established outlet.

Images are read at the sites of production, of the image itself and of circulation (Rose, 2016), with attention to the shift from insurgent images before 5 August 2024 to authorised commemorative imagery afterwards. In these texts, the positioning of women as grammatical agents and objects is coded, as are the diagnosis and prognosis of gender equality, protection, and frames of religion, and whose voice is recorded (Lazar, 2007; Verloo, 2007). The corpus includes English-language originals as well as English-language reporting of Bangla statements. If an argument hinges on a Bangla term, then the Bangla term is cited in the original. Process tracing translates the proposition and its contenders into observable implications and evaluates them by way of hypothesis verification tests called hoop tests, which a hypothesis has to pass to be considered viable, and smoking-gun tests, which confirm a hypothesis if they are passed, but do not eliminate it if they are not (Mahoney, 2012). The evidence that is used as the diagnostic is explicitly stated as per Fairfield and Charman (2017) to allow readers to evaluate inferences, rather than relying on them. Descriptive figures are not used for statistical inference, but rather as evidence of outcomes and commitment fulfilment.

Research Design Boundaries

The study employs well-specified research design boundaries that define the range of the study and constrain the empirical claims and analytical inferences made in the study. Chronologically, it covers the time frame starting from 1 July 2024 through to 31 October 2026, spanning the period of the July Uprising, the interim government and the election of 2026, the allocation of reserved seats, and the first months of the new government. The scope of the study is analytical, in that local government, the civil service and the judiciary are not included, whereas national transitional institutions are, in addition to national party politics. In the context of actors under investigation, it looks at the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party (NCP), as well as the student platform from which the NCP emerged. The Awami League is only discussed in the context of its non-participation in politics in the period studied. The research method used in this study does not involve interviews, focus group discussions, surveys or statistical analysis. This method does not depend on the participants' retrospective accounts of events and as such mitigates potential recall bias, but also restricts access to deliberations within the party, as well as to other party decision-making processes that are not public. The study's analytical contribution is not in terms of statistical generalisability, but in terms of within-case, mechanism-based explanations; however, it does highlight the conditions under which the proposed explanatory mechanisms can be extended beyond the case. Lastly, in terms of the type of evidence, the pictorial evidence is not a systematic and coded count of all the images created during the uprising but instead an interpretive analysis of photographs, images and graffiti found in publicly available sources.

Reflexivity and ethics

Many of the images from the uprising show identifiable young women, some of whom were later harassed online, although the research uses only public material. The article does not therefore include any images of private individuals, and only mentions public figures in their public roles, and does not repeat sexual abuse beyond that which is necessary to establish its political function. The author will include his/her positionality towards the parties and movements analysed in the final submission, according to the journal's requirements.

Result and Discussion

Context: From Uprising to Elected Government

The movement began on 1 July 2024 as a student protest against the reinstatement of quotas in public-service recruitment, led by Students Against Discrimination (SAD). After violent repression, in which as many as 1,400 people may have been killed (OHCHR, 2025), it forced Sheikh Hasina to resign and leave the country on 5 August 2024. An interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, with student leaders among its advisers, established reform commissions, including a Women's Affairs Reform Commission. Their recommendations were negotiated with parties by a National Consensus Commission, producing the July National Charter, which most major parties signed in October 2025. In May 2025 the interim government banned the activities of the Awami League (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Student leaders launched the NCP in February 2025, and it later joined an alliance led by Jamaat-e-Islami.

The election and a referendum on the Charter were held on 12 February 2026. The BNP won 208 general seats, Jamaat 68 and the NCP 6 (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2026c). The seats set aside for women were distributed according to the number of general seats won by each party, and were filled in April–May 2026 (Dhaka Tribune, 2026b). For the analysis, three features of this context are important. First, the change was abrupt, yet there was a degree of continuity in the party system – the party in power was an established one, which returned to power after many years in opposition, with its organisation and recruitment unchanged. Second, the Awami League, which had ruled for 15 years and dominated the three previous parliaments, was removed from the contest. Third, during this time Islamist groups increased their influence in public discourse and over women's rights issues.

Stage One: Iconic Inclusion in the Uprising

Women as initiators

The documentary record leaves little doubt that women were initiators, not merely participants. Contemporaneous reporting describes several hundred residents of Ruqayyah (Rokeya) Hall breaking their gates late on 14 July 2024, with students from the other women's halls following within the hour, and records that on 16 July the women's halls were the first to expel Chhatra League leaders (Mizan, 2024). The same reporting records women students resolving to break the locks of men's halls if Chhatra League activists prevented male students from leaving. The OHCHR (2025) independently found that women and girls were at the forefront of the early protests. It also found that gender-based violence, including physical assault, threats of rape and sexualised insults, was used to deter women's participation and undermine female leadership, and judged that more incidents likely occurred than it could document. Repression thus targeted women specifically as *leaders*.

Women also took over leadership functions when men could not exercise them. Umama Fatema, a central coordinator and later spokesperson of SAD, stated publicly that women stepped forward to lead when male coordinators were arrested, and were sidelined after 5 August while men were portrayed as the movement's heroes (*The Daily Star*, 2024b). Another coordinator, Nusrat Tabassum, was among six coordinators detained by the Detective Branch in July 2024 and has described being tortured in custody (Mizan, 2024). Women were thus not only present at the uprising's origin but exercised leadership at its most dangerous moments.

Visibility without authority

This leadership was visually recorded as follows. One of the most reproduced images, which was painted on campus walls and spread on social media platforms, was that of the student Abu Sayed facing police with his arms outstretched before he was shot (Rahman, 2025). The uprising's main visual paradigm was martyrdom, which was coded as male. Images that are iconic are by no means neutral records – they determine who is to gain political benefit from whose sacrifice. The press reports, even sympathetic ones, placed the role of women, to some extent, under the umbrella of 'mothers of martyrs' (Mizan, 2024). In the examples documented here, women appear more often in a collective or allegorical shape than in the role of an identifiable leader. A University of Dhaka seminar analysed the uprising's graffiti through the lens of gender and masculinity, drawing attention to a politics of erasure and to differences in how women were represented before and after 5 August (University of Dhaka, 2025). The sociologist

Samina Luthfa warned that "an effort is underway to downplay the extent of women's participation" (Rahman, 2025).

After 5 August, insurgent graffiti gave way to authorised commemorative murals, some commissioned or inaugurated by the state, such as those titled "July Heroism" and "July Sacrifice" at the Padma Bridge (*The Business Standard*, 2025a). The iconography of the revolution was thus institutionalised in idioms of sacrifice and heroism, in which women appeared largely as mothers of martyrs, sisters of protesters or allegorical figures. The transition from insurgent to authorised imagery matters because authorised imagery is the version of the revolution that later actors could invoke when claiming its legacy.

Recognition in a separate register

Where women's leadership was formally recognised, it was recognised separately. In July 2025 the University of Dhaka declared 14 July "Dhaka University Women Students' Day" in honour of the hall breakouts (*The Daily Observer*, 2025). The recognition was real, but at the campus level and as a 'women-specific' commemoration, not at the national level. Sadly, the central convening committee announced by SAD in October 2024 had just one woman, Umama Fatema, as spokesperson (The Daily Star, 2024a), thus representing iconic inclusion precisely – the voice and face of the movement outside its decision-making core. In July/August 2026, two years after the hall breakouts, women students were again protesting against the evening curfew imposed on the women's halls and some criticised the suspension of the curfew for a single night to mark the occasion as a reminder of the rule (Waresa, 2026). The locks that women had broken to initiate the uprising had been restored.

Assessment

The evidence thus corroborates the first step. There was evidence of women being both initiators and leaders and of their suppression as such, but also of their representation as symbols of courage and sacrifice in separate registers. This did not, however, establish what would follow, but merely set a blueprint for the bargaining phase to follow.

Stage Two: Discursive Repositioning in Transitional Bargaining

The Women's Affairs Reform Commission and the politics of backlash

The most serious effort to translate the uprising's claims of equality into a gender agenda was the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, which tabled over 400 suggestions on 19 April 2025 (The Business Standard, 2025b). Hefazat-e-Islam called for the abolition of the commission, terming its report anti-Quranic (Dhaka Tribune, 2025a). Speakers at a rally of some 20,000 people on 3 May 2025 announced that men and women can never be equal (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Hefazat's declaration placed the dissolution of the commission alongside demands for a ban on the Awami League (*The Daily Star*, 2025a). By pairing the women's commission with the deposed regime as an object of grievance, it positioned gender equality as foreign to the revolution rather than an expression of it, Six women served a legal notice on Hefazat over derogatory remarks about the commission's members, and reporting noted that the organisation continued to portray women's rights as a Western plot promoted by NGO-funded feminists (*The Business Standard*, 2025b). Gender equality was thereby recoded from a revolutionary demand into a threat to the revolution's moral community.

The Charter: from agents to objects of encouragement

The July National Charter shows the repositioning most precisely. The reform process had initially put forward the suggestion of a 33% nomination quota for women; women's organisations and some political parties had been demanding 100 reserved seats for women, to be directly elected (Prothom Alo, 2025; Turjo & Kamal, 2025). In the consensus talks, which concluded in July 2025, the 50 indirectly filled reserved seats were retained. Parties would be called upon to put forward a minimum of 5% (rising by five percentage points at every election) of women candidates at the next election for general seats (BSS, 2025).

There are three aspects of this settlement that are of importance. First, the language is hortatory, meaning that parties are invited, not compelled; and women are objects of parties' discretion, not holders of a right. Second, the justification located the problem in women themselves: parties refused to go above 5% citing a lack of qualified female candidates (*Prothom Alo*, 2025), and the BNP's negotiator proposed 5% because his party would struggle to field more women (*The Daily Star*, 2025b; Turjo & Kamal, 2025). Third, the process excluded those whose representation was being decided. Women's organisations rejected it, asking, in one widely reported headline, "how can you decide on women without them?" (*Dawn*, 2025). The Charter thus reproduced, in its procedure as well as its content, the separation between women as the subjects of policy and men as the authors of it.

Party discourse: protection, nature and channelling

Party discourse during the campaign completed the repositioning through four frames (Table 2).

Table 2
Frames in party discourse on women's political role, 2025–2026

Frame	Illustrative evidence	Positioning of women
Naturalised difference	Jamaat's leader said a woman could never lead the party, citing childbearing, while confirming it fielded no women (*The Financial Express*, 2026)	Leadership as biologically closed to women
Protection	Jamaat pledged a "significant number of women" in cabinet (*National Herald*, 2026); the NCP condemned online abuse of its women members, and its leader said many had retreated from politics (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2025b; UNB, 2026b)	Vulnerable citizens to be shielded and provided for
Channelling	A BNP leader said women active in past movements would get priority for reserved seats (*The Report*, 2026)	Movement credit redeemable in appointed, not contested, seats
Qualification deficit	Parties cited a shortage of qualified women to cap nominations at 5% (*Prothom Alo*, 2025)	Not yet ready for competitive politics

Note. Frames were identified through feminist critical discourse and frame analysis of the sources cited in each row.

The frames come from parties with very different ideologies. Naturalisation was essentially religious; protection appeared in conservative and progressive variants, and the NCP's discussion of abuse, though a genuine response to actual abuse, nonetheless framed women's presence chiefly as a problem of safety; whilst channelling and qualification were presented as pragmatic. The common denominator is that they all deny women the role of contenders for general seats and the right to equal candidacy. Across the entire spectrum, women became subjects of protection, provision or patience.

Assessment

There is support for the second step in the mechanism. In the bargaining arena, women went from being political agents, in Stage One, to being protected citizens, objects of encouragement. The recognition granted through iconic inclusion did not lead to a voice in the negotiation process; it was rather an image of women as brave but helpless which sustained the frames that allowed for the setting of low and voluntary targets. These frames were not used to pick candidates, but rather they reduced the political "price" of not picking female candidates.

Stage Three: Institutional Filtering in Party Politics

The outcome: nominations and results

The Charter's nomination commitment was directly put to the test during the election, and it was not fulfilled. The reported numbers of women vary across the stages of nomination, scrutiny and withdrawal, but they are all around 4% (Table 3). Of the 1,981 candidates (before final withdrawals), 80, or 4.04%, were women and over 30 of the 51 registered parties had no women candidates (UNB, 2026a). The share of women among party nominees was 4.05% in the final list and no party reached the 5% target, said Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) (Dhaka Courier, 2026; bdnews24.com, 2026b).

Table 3
Women's general-seat nominations and results by party, February 2026 election

Party	Women nominated	Women elected
BNP	10 after scrutiny (15 originally)	6
Jamaat-e-Islami	0	0
NCP	2–3	0
Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (Marxist)	9 (about one-third of its candidates)	0
All parties and independents	76–88 (about 4% of candidates)	7

Note. Ranges reflect differences between sources and stages of nomination, scrutiny and withdrawal. The seventh elected woman, Rumeen Farhana, won as an independent. Sources: UNB (2026a); Dhaka Courier (2026); bdnews24.com (2026b); *Dhaka Tribune* (2026a); *The Financial Express* (2026).

Seven directly elected women equals the 2001 figure and compares with 19 in 2024 and 22 in 2018 (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2026a; bdnews24.com, 2026b). The decline is all the more striking because it followed a transition in which women's participation had been prominent and officially acknowledged, and because the parties had themselves endorsed a nomination target only months earlier. Four filters account for this outcome.

Centralised selection and the lapse of voluntary targets

The major political parties in Bangladesh choose their candidates from the centre. In such systems, the gender outcomes will depend on the attitude of party elites to equality (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Kenny & Verge, 2016). The 5% figure, as it was a call and not a rule, carried no sanctions when it was not adhered to. The BNP had proposed the number but ended up with only 10 valid female candidates, below its own proposed threshold. The term 'forgetting the new', coined by Mackay (2014), describes a case where a commitment made in the process of institutional design "faded" when it first came into play.

Channelling into reserved seats

The reserved-seat system provided the route through which women's movement credentials were redeemed without competing for general seats. The 50 seats were allocated 36 to the BNP-led alliance, 13 to the Jamaat-led alliance and one to independents (Jagonews24, 2026), and 49 women were declared elected unopposed (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2026b). Jamaat, which had nominated no women for general seats, sent women to parliament entirely through party-selected reserved seats (*Prothom Alo*, 2026b). The reserved-seat system therefore allowed even a party that rejected women's leadership to display women's presence in parliament without any woman competing for votes.

In particular, the NCP case is revealing. All the prominent women leaders of the party, who were active in the uprising and who held senior central committee positions, were sent to reserved seats instead of general seats; Mahmuda Alam Mitu and Nusrat Tabassum were thus elected to parliament, while a third, Monira Sharmin, was rejected at scrutiny (Prothom Alo, 2026a). Together with the BNP's declaration that past movement representatives would be given priority for reserved seats (The Report, 2026), it approaches a smoking gun for channelling: Movement credentials were explicitly transformed into appointed seats, rather than competitive seats, echoing what Panday (2008) found in local government.

Kinship and the informal rules of recruitment

On 17 February 2026, 49 ministers and state ministers took the oath of office, of whom three were women and only one was a full minister. All three were new to Parliament, and each was the daughter of a former cabinet minister (bdnews24.com, 2026a). Women's route to the executive was via their families, not the uprising, as Bjarnegård (2013) explains, a family route that allows women to be admitted to the elite through kinship.

Attrition and auxiliary-isation in the movement party

The movement's own organisations show a parallel pattern. In June 2025 Umama Fatema resigned from SAD, saying she had been pressured not to continue (*The Financial Express*, 2025), and a former Chattogram coordinator quit politics citing harassment by male fellow activists (*Dawn*, 2025). The NCP's draft constitution required at least three women on an 11-member Political Council (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2025b), a meaningful formal rule. But its main initiative on women was a separate women's wing, Jatiya Nari Shakti, launched on 8 March 2026, although NCP convener Nahid Islam noted that the party had initially intended to address women's issues within the main structure (UNB, 2026b). The leadership subsequently disbanded the wing's committee and removed its convener (Prothom Alo, 2026a), placing women's representation in a peripheral structure, the wing, which can be reconstituted from above. The pattern is important because the NCP had the best claim to the legacy of the uprising – if conversion failed there, it cannot be attributed solely to the conservatism of older parties.

Testing the rival explanations

The evidence is summarised in Table 4, which shows the evidence for and against the central proposition and its competing claims. The explanation of a shortage of supply is especially worthy of careful consideration, since the number of women aspirants was actually quite low. The question that needs to be asked is whether the women who were

available, including even the most prominent leaders within the movement, were nominated for general seats. They were not, which suggests that their supply was one that was tailored to the party gatekeepers' expectations, and not an autonomous limitation (Krook, 2010).

Table 4
Process-tracing assessment of the central proposition and rival explanations

Explanation	Diagnostic evidence	Test logic	Verdict
Gendered conversion failure (central proposition)	Movement women channelled into reserved seats; qualification deficits cited before nomination; BNP below its own 5% proposal; all women ministers recruited through kinship	Passes hoop tests at each stage; channelling approaches a smoking gun	Supported
Supply deficit	Only about 4% of 2,568 aspirants were women (*The Daily Star*, 2026), yet the BNP initially nominated 15 women, a small leftist party fielded women for one-third of its seats, and NCP women leaders were routed to reserved seats	If supply were binding, available women leaders would be nominated for general seats; they were not	Weakened: supply was low but shaped by party gatekeeping (Krook, 2010)
Awami League exclusion	Competing parties fell short of commitments they had endorsed; more than 30 parties nominated no women	If purely compositional, competing parties would meet their own pledges	Insufficient: explains part of the aggregate decline only
Islamist veto	Jamaat fielded no women, but the largest non-Islamist party also fell below 5% and the movement party routed its women to reserved seats	If decisive, non-Islamist parties would perform markedly better	Partial: shaped discourse but not cross-party filtering
Generic newcomer disadvantage	Male student leaders became interim-government advisers and founded and led the NCP; women leaders resigned, left politics or entered via reserved seats	If gender-neutral, men and women leaders would convert capital at similar rates	Rejected: conversion differed by gender

Note. A hoop test must be passed for an explanation to remain viable; a smoking-gun test strongly confirms an explanation if passed (Mahoney, 2012).

Assessment

The evidence supports the third stage. Lapsed voluntary targets, reserved-seat channelling, kinship recruitment, and attrition and auxiliary-isation converted the frames of Stage Two into exclusion. No rival accounts for the full pattern, though the supply deficit and Islamist veto identify contributing conditions that the mechanism incorporates.

Gendered Conversion Failure in Comparative Perspective

From paradox to mechanism

The Bangladesh case confirms that women's revolutionary mobilisation rarely yields commensurate institutional gains (Khalil, 2014; Molyneux, 1985). Its contribution lies in showing *how* the paradox is produced. The three stages are analytically separable and empirically traceable, and each depends on the one before. The paradox is therefore not a single moment of betrayal after victory but a cumulative devaluation of women's capital, spread across arenas and actors, most of whom did not see themselves as excluding women.

This matters for comparative research, because it permits stage-by-stage comparison that asks where, in a given transition, the exchange rate for women's capital was set, and by whom. Accounts of the Arab uprisings have often focused on a single stage: the sexualised targeting of women in Egypt (Hafez, 2014) or the strength of prior women's organising in Tunisia (Mako & Moghadam, 2021). Tunisia's stronger outcome, on this reading, also reflects a binding rule requiring men and women to alternate on candidate lists in its first post-revolutionary election (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The rule did not produce parity, since men headed most lists, but it interrupted the filtering stage. Bangladesh's voluntary 5% target did not.

Islamism, backlash and the cross-party character of exclusion

One of the most publicised arguments is that women's marginalisation since 2024 is due to the growth of Islamist politics. There is some evidence for this. Islamist groups had a powerful influence over the discourse of Stage Two and Jamaat fielded no female candidates. However, filtering was cross-party. The largest non-Islamist party did not live up to its own promise and the party offering the most 'egalitarian' rhetoric steered its female leaders to reserved seats. Islamist opposition, therefore, did not act as a veto, but as a talking point, forcing the discussion against the backdrop of lesser and more voluntary commitments, and allowing secular parties to benefit from this. Exclusion was thus not only a product of the most conservative actors, but also of different ideologies.

Theoretical implications

Gender and revolution. In this literature, from the identification of a "paradox" to the specification of a "mechanism," gendered conversion failure is brought to the fore. Comparative research should not only question whether women's gains have been reversed after a transition, but in what arena, by whom and at which point the value of women's mobilisational capital has been set. The case also illustrates that there are gendered pathways to party leadership and parliamentary office through becoming a student leader; male student leaders became advisers or party leaders, while the most prominent female leaders were appointed to office or opted out of politics. In movement-to-party transitions, gender should thus be considered a variable affecting who brings movement resources into institutions, rather than a stand-alone issue.

Feminist institutionalism and nested newness. At a revolutionary moment, numerous institutions are born at once, each one of which must be situated in pre-existing institutions: a party system that is disrupted but not abolished; a reserved-seat system that goes back to the 1972 constitution; and pre-existing recruitment rules and understandings of religion and gender that are contested. Here, the mechanisms of regress take a particular form, as per Mackay (2014). The old is remembered when old players come back into the competition without having to change their recruitment strategies; the new is forgotten when commitments made during bargaining turn out to be voluntary and then lapse. The framework assumes that the greater the shock and conflict of the newness, the weaker the commitment will be. Revolutionary moments may therefore not necessarily be welcoming to gender reform due to the pace at which institutions are being created, while older recruitment practices are still in full swing.

Candidate selection and quota design. Krook (2009) emphasises that quota design, especially enforcement, determines whether quotas change outcomes. In Bangladesh, the reverse is the case: a lack of enforcement of a "quota"-like commitment mixed with reserved seats leads to a reduction in the incentive for parties to nominate

women to general seats, since they can show women's presence without competitive nominations. The case also serves as a warning against purely formal explanations. The NCP's formal rule on its Political Council did not prevent attrition or channelling, and kinship determined who got into the cabinet. These informal institutions (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Waylen, 2014) imply that formal reform that does not consider informal recruitment rules will be absorbed. Reform strategies thus need to target not only the formal rules of candidate selection, but also the informal ones.

Scope conditions. The mechanism should travel to cases at the intersection of mass protest and the public presence of women, elite bargaining among established parties, and new commitments alongside older recruitment institutions. Sri Lanka after the Aragalaya (2022) and Nepal after the youth-led protests (2025) are just two possible comparisons that come to mind, as are previous experiences in the Arab world. If binding parity rules interrupt filtering, the mechanism should be weaker, which is something that is testable for comparative work. The framework also enumerates items that would count against it. If women movement leaders in these instances were nominated for competitive positions at the same rate as men, or if transitional texts credited women as the authors and not the objects of reform, then the mechanism would not be in play. Conversely, if women's organisations manage to obtain formal representation in bargaining fora, the discursive phase should be weakened, even if there is filtering. By treating the three stages as independently observable, this approach enables partial cases to be detected and compared, rather than coded simply as successes or failures.

Practical implications

For constitutional and transitional designers. The moment of greatest institutional openness was also the moment at which gender commitments were most easily diluted. Commitments negotiated in consensus forums proved only as strong as their enforcement mechanisms: a hortatory target lapsed at the first election after it was agreed. Enforceability, rather than ambition alone, should be the main test of a gender provision.

For political parties. Centralised selection gave party leaderships near-complete control over whether women were nominated. The same centralisation that produced exclusion could produce inclusion if leaders chose to use it, as the small leftist party that nominated women for about one-third of its seats illustrates. Parties cannot credibly attribute low nomination rates to a shortage of qualified women while routing their own prominent activists into appointed seats.

For electoral management bodies. Reported figures for women candidates varied across the stages of nomination, scrutiny and withdrawal, indicating that gender-disaggregated candidate data are not published in a consistent, stage-by-stage form. Without such data, compliance with any nomination target cannot be monitored or enforced.

For women's organisations and activists. Visibility during mobilisation did not substitute for presence in bargaining forums. Women's organisations reported that their proposals were effectively ignored during the Charter process (*Prothom Alo*, 2025), and activists who relied on movement credentials alone were channelled into appointed seats. Formal places in bargaining bodies and independent electoral bases appear to be preconditions for conversion.

For international partners. Gender provision enforceability can be a technical assistance and monitoring priority for organisations supporting electoral and constitutional processes, while acknowledging national ownership of electoral and constitutional process reform. The OHCHR's (2025) recommendation for gender-sensitive investigation of violence during the uprising offers an existing point of entry.

Conclusion

This article set out to explain why women's prominent mobilisation in Bangladesh's July Uprising failed to translate into institutional power. It has argued that the outcome is best understood as gendered conversion failure, a cumulative devaluation of women's mobilisational capital across three stages. Iconic inclusion made women visible as symbols rather than leaders; discursive repositioning recast them as protected citizens; and institutional filtering, through lapsed voluntary targets, reserved-seat channelling, kinship recruitment and attrition, converted these framings into exclusion. Explanations based on supply deficits, the Awami League's absence, an Islamist veto or generic newcomer disadvantage each capture part of the picture but not the full pattern.

The article makes three contributions. It offers a theoretical concept, namely, gendered conversion failure, in a manner that connects the literature on gender and revolution with feminist institutionalism, in that it turns a very common paradox into a series of stages that can be traced and compared, and it extends Mackay's (2014) nested newness to revolutionary moments by demonstrating that new gender commitments can fail at the first moment of implementation. It provides an empirical description of the gender politics of the transition in Bangladesh from the hall breakouts in July 2024 to the formation of the 13th parliament and cabinet in 2024–26. Methodologically, it demonstrates the possibility of combining visual, discursive and institutional evidence in a single process-tracing design that is based on publicly available and verifiable evidence. There are a number of limitations inherent in the study. Private deliberation within parties, usually in the context of selecting candidates, is only inferred from outcomes and from public comment. The visual strand does not offer a coded census, but rather interprets a documented public archive; candidate figures differ between the various sources; and the sources, predominantly in the English language, are not comprehensive and may not report activism outside the city of Dhaka. The end of the period of study is October 2026. Future research should code the full archive of visuals, compare the mechanism across the youth-led uprisings in South Asia that have taken place in recent years, and track the 14th parliamentary election to see if the 10% target of the Charter is remembered or not. The bigger message is that the price of women's political capital does not necessarily rise with revolution. While women secured their place in the initial story of the revolution in Bangladesh, what they were denied was any control over the rules that determined the value of that place. The old exchange rate will probably be restored as long as the terms of conversion are not put in writing and become binding rules.

Recommendations

Drawing on these findings, the article offers five recommendations for Bangladesh and for transitional settings more generally.

- **Make nomination targets binding.** Commitments to women's candidacies should be written into electoral law with enforcement, for example as a condition of party registration or of the validity of a party's nomination list, rather than framed as calls

on parties. The Charter's escalating targets, from 10% at the next election towards 33%, will be credible only if non-compliance carries consequences.

- **Reform the reserved-seat system.** Indirectly filled reserved seats should be replaced or supplemented by directly elected seats Reserved seats should not count towards a party's nomination commitments, so that they cannot substitute for competitive general-seat candidacies.
- **Include women in bargaining forums.** Consensus, constitutional and reform bodies should include women's organisations and women movement leaders as formal participants with recorded positions.
- **Make selection transparent.** Parties should publish their selection criteria, and the Election Commission should publish gender-disaggregated data on aspirants, nominations, scrutiny outcomes and withdrawals for every party.
- **Address political violence and online abuse.** Violence against women in politics should be treated as an electoral integrity issue, with dedicated reporting channels, timely investigation and protection measures for candidates and activists (OHCHR, 2025).

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Ethical Considerations

No human subjects or personal information was used in this study. It is based exclusively on published books that are accessible to the public (and publisher descriptions and epitexts) cited in the references. Ethical approval was not necessary.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI (ChatGpt and Grammarly) was used for language editing and condensing text. It was not used for the data collection, coding the corpus and drawing findings. All text generated by AI is reviewed and edited by the author, and the author is responsible for the article's content.

Data Availability Statement

The data analysed are all published data, as mentioned in the references. The 39 corpus books are listed verifying, with the verification sources. The coding frame and coded dataset are available on reasonable request from the author.

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