

## **Gender Gap in Political Participation: A Study from Khulna District of Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract:**

**Background:** The value of equal participation in politics is the prerequisite of gender equality as well as national development. However, women in Bangladesh generally remain insignificant in the entire political domain. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to assess the gender gap in political participation by examining the role of structural, situational, and cultural factors in the highly gender-oriented context of Bangladesh.

**Materials and Methods:** A total of 597 participants (295 men and 302 women) were selected by proportionate stratified random sampling from Khulna District. A quantitative study was operated with a self-made interview schedule. Significant test Cramer's V, hierarchical multiple linear regression, and t-test were adopted for the measurement of significance.

**Results:** Analyzing the survey data, as expected, there was a remarkable gap between men and women in different forms of political participation. Overall, men were more likely to participate in any form of visible and invisible political activities than women. For instance, after controlling socioeconomic (structural and situational) predictors, the parental political participation positively influenced on women's political participation (visible and invisible participation,  $\beta=0.405^{***}$ , and  $\beta=0.507^{***}$ , respectively), religiosity, on the contrary, negatively influenced ( $\beta= -0.269^{***}$  in visible and  $\beta= -0.279^{***}$  in invisible participation). The study findings also depict that women demonstrate a lower mean level of political engagement in comparison to men by considering levels of family arrangement, and domestic pressure.

**Conclusion and Recommendations:** It is an undeniable fact that gender equality is almost necessary for all aspects of life. However, the current scenario of politics has witnessed that women's participation in politics, as well as development sectors, is not increasing at an expected rate. Thus, the study proposes the government's strict role in the proper implementation of the National Women Development Policy for ensuring better accountability, decision-making, and proper utilization of human resources.

**Keywords:** Gender gap; Political participation, Religiosity; Parental political participation; Domestic work

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The value of equal participation in politics, the heart of genuine democracy, is the prerequisite for gender equality as well as national development<sup>34</sup>. Democratically, equal participation in politics directly promotes women's engagement in public decision making, and it is a mechanism of assuring better accountability to women<sup>16</sup>.

However, women in Bangladesh generally remain insignificant in the entire political domain, although Bangladesh has had two prominent women in the most leading positions of the state from the last three decades<sup>9</sup>. Though noticeable participation has increased in education, economic, employment sectors, women in Bangladesh suffering diverse social, cultural, and religious challenges that impeding their political participation. They, moreover, are neglected by their male counterparts<sup>25</sup>. Not only Bangladesh but also modern industrialized world has been observing gender disparities in political participation from the past fifty years, even though the gender inequality in political leadership, representation, resources, and engagement have been significantly diminished<sup>11,26</sup>.

Since the 1970s, studies of political participation reveal that women have been lower participating in both visible (e.g., party engagement, voting behavior), and invisible political activities like talking about politics, getting information about political issues<sup>1,7,15,18,20,35</sup>. Nevertheless, it is globally recognized that enter political domain is dominated by men whereas women demonstrate lower participation in political activities,

leadership, and representation<sup>1,2,24,31,33</sup>. Three are three broad interrelated constraints account for this gap by calling upon defective ways of socialization, situational, and structural constraints<sup>3,12,21,36</sup>. Therefore, in Bangladesh, it has been realized that without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision making, the aims of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved<sup>25</sup>.

While acknowledging the abundance of worldwide focus to overcome these social tensions, it is extremely limited in Bangladesh. To overcome these problems, it is a desperate necessity to address these issues publicly. Therefore, the central aim of this study is to find out the gender gap in political participation with root constraints. The study, therefore, takes an innovative approach to assess the gender gap in political participation by examining the role of structural, situational, and cultural constraints in the highly gender-oriented context of Bangladesh.

## II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

**Study Location:** The study was carried out in Khulna District. Multistage systematically sampling was employed to select two unions from *Batighata* and *DumuriaUpazilla* and two wards from Khulna City Corporation.

**Study Design:** Following a quantitative approach, this study incorporated the survey method to collect data.

**Study Population and Sampling:** To full-fill the objective of the research, some specific requirements were maintained to identify the participants to collect valid and reliable data from the selected areas of Khulna District. According to the inclusion criteria, all the local voters listed in the voter lists of the selected areas were the population of the study, except dead persons and who were staying in abroad. Considering the abovementioned criteria, as a census procedure, the voter lists were collected from the Ward Commissioner and Union Parishad Members. A total of 6237 voters were identified as the population of the study.

In this study, the sample size was calculated by using the 'Sample Size Calculator' software. Through this determining confidence level of 95 percent with a confidence interval of 3.5 and percentage picking a choice of 60. A total of 671 voters were primarily selected as the sample size. A proportionate stratified random sampling technique was applied for surveying a representative portion of the sample from the population for maintaining the appropriateness and objectivity. In this technique, the population was stratified into two strata and sample items were selected through a random number generator table.

However, after completing surveys, a total sample size came down in 597 (295 men and 302) because the total response rate was 89 percent (11 percent of participants were absent and abstain from participating).

**Data Collection:** The effectiveness of the interview schedule was verified by conducting the pre-test among 50 voters with a semi-structured interview schedule with both open and close-ended items. Then, the interview schedules were checked and edited to minimize the incompleteness of the data extracted from the respondents without any sort of manipulation to maintain the integrity and ethics of the research. Finally, a total 597 surveys were conducted from February, 2019 to March, 2019.

**Variables and measures:** Table 3 is a quick overview of the main variables used in this study and how they have been measured:

**Table 3: Measurement of the variables**

Factors	Variables	Description and Measurement
	Independent Variables	
Structural Factors	Age	Continuous variable: M=41.49, SD=6.29.
	Gender	Dichotomous variable: coded by, 0=Men, 1=Women
	Year of schooling	Continuous variable: M=8.72, SD=5.29.
	Employment status	Dichotomous variable: coded by, 0=Unemployed, 1=Employed.
	Place of residence	Dichotomous variable: coded by, 0=Rural, 1=Urban.
Situational Factors	Domestic work	Continuous variable: M=33.08, SD=22.48. Further, it was categorized into; 1=1st quartile ( $\leq 25$ hours), 2=2nd quartile (26-50 hours), 3=3rd quartile (51-75 hours), 4=4th quartile ( $\geq 76$ hours).
	Family arrangement	Categorical variable: coded by, 1=Single, 2=No children, 3=Youngest child: 0-3 years, 4=Youngest child: 4-6 years, 5=Youngest child: 7+ years.
Cultural Factors	Religiosity	An explanatory variable measured using a 5-point Likert scale question asking about the level of respondents' religious participation on prayer, fasting, recitation of holy scripture, participate in religious rituals/ceremony, and donate in religious institution. Indicators were categorized into frequency; 1=Not at all, 2=rarely, 3=occasionally, 4=frequently, and 5=very frequently (Cronbach's $\alpha=.76$ , M=17.34, SD=3.85).
	Parental political engagement	An explanatory variable, measured by adding scores of 12 items (six from mother and six from father) attending a political meeting, attending a rally, donating or raising money for party, volunteering for a party, getting political information, and talking about politics. All of these indicators were categorized into five-point Likert scale; 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=occasionally, 4=frequently, and 5=very frequently (Cronbach's $\alpha=.89$ , M=19.34, SD=7.16).
	Dependent Variables	
	Visible political participation	This is the first dependent variable, and it was measured using a multi-dimensional construct in which binary (yes/no) responses to the followings were aggregated: attend political meeting,

attend rally, donate or raise money for the party and volunteer for a party. Again, this indicators were also measured into five-point Likert scale of categories; 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=occasionally, 4=frequently, and 5=very frequently (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.82$ ,  $M=5.27$ ,  $SD=2.93$ ).

Invisible political participation      Invisible political participation, second dependent variable, was captured by using a multi-dimensional construct in which six-point Likert scale responses to the two indicators were aggregated' getting political information and talking about politics. Both were categorized of frequency, 1=never, 2=more than once in a year,3=more than once a month, 4=once a week, 5=more than once a week and 6=every day ( $M=6.20$ ,  $SD=3.00$ ).

M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation.

**Data Analysis:** The researchers used the IBM SPSS version 21.0 for the statistical analysis in the study. This study only incorporated inferential statistics to measure the association between dependent and independent variables. Signiant test Cramer's V was applied to identify the gender gap between men and women in different forms of political participation. Also, Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression (HMLR) models were tested to explore the effects of structural, situational, and cultural factors on political participation. To compare the mean difference of political participation between men and women based on situational factors several t-tests were employed.

### III. RESULTS

#### *III.1. Gender gap in different forms of political participation (sig. test Cramer's V)*

A preliminary comparison between women and men on a large array of visible and invisible political activities offers a general overview of gender gaps in Bangladesh (Table 2). Cramer's V was reported to find out the gender gap between men and women based on different forms of political activities. Findings reported in table 2 shows that the gender gap was largely visible in political participation (visible and invisible).

Men are more likely to participate in any form of visible political activities, especially when attending a political meeting, attending a rally, donating or raising money for a party, and volunteering for a party. The participation was 22 percentage points higher (highest gender gap) for men when 'volunteering for a party' (27 percent of men and 5 percent of women), 18 percentage points higher when 'attending the political meeting' (22 percent of men vs. 4 percent of women).

Just as so too, women proved significantly less active than men, both in terms of getting political information and talking about politics. Specifically, the gender difference was 12 percentage points higher for men when 'talking every day' about politics (16 percent of men and 4 percent of women) and 'getting everyday' information about politics (14 percent of men vs. 2 percent of women). Sharp differences stand out regarding never getting political information and never talking about politics, whereas women's participation was 18 percentage points and 21 percentage points higher in never getting political information and never talking about politics, respectively.

**Table 2:** Participation in political activities (at least once in the last one year, %) by gender, difference, and sig. test.

Political Participation	Men	Women	W-M <sup>a</sup> (difference)	Sig. test (Cramer's V)
<b>Visible Political Activities</b>				
Attending a political meeting	22.4	3.6	-18.8	0.279***
Attending a rally	22.0	6.3	-15.7	0.226***
Donating or raising money for party	9.5	1.0	-8.5	0.191***
Volunteering for a party	26.8	4.6	-22.2	0.305***
<b>Invisible Political Activities</b>				
<i>Getting Political Information</i>				
Every day	16.6	4.3	-12.3	
More than once a week	25.4	9.6	-15.8	
Once a week	13.9	11.3	-2.6	
More than once a month	14.2	10.6	-3.6	0.375***
More than once in a year	20.3	36.4	+16.1	
Never	9.5	27.8	+18.3	
<i>Talking About Politics</i>				
Every day	14.6	2.3	-12.3	
More than once a week	20.0	11.6	-8.4	
Once a week	21.0	14.9	-6.1	0.369***
More than once a month	23.7	20.5	-3.2	
More than once in a year	13.9	23.2	+9.3	
Never	6.8	27.5	+20.7	
<i>N</i>	295	302		

<sup>a</sup>M=Men, W=Women.

**III.II. Factors of political participation (regression analysis).**

Table 3 illustrates the regression predicting the effects of structural, situational, and cultural factors on political participation. This study ran eight distinct regression models (four for men and four women), using hierarchical multiple linear regression, gathering evidence for the first independent variable (religiosity), and, then, for the second one (Parental political participation).

The regression result (Table 3) represents that among the cultural factors, religiosity was a significant predictor of political participation for both men and women. This is the case after controlling for socioeconomic variables such as age, year of schooling, employment status, place of residence, and domestic work. Specifically, the findings indicate that women are less likely to participate in visible political activities ( $\beta = -.274^{***}$ ) and invisible political activities ( $\beta = -0.292^{***}$ ) than men for every unit increase of religiosity.

Table 3 also explains that the effect of increasing employment status, among the structural factors, was one of the most influencing predictors of higher political participation of women. Besides, the year of schooling was also positively related to women's visible ( $\beta = 0.168^*$ ) and invisible ( $\beta = 0.506^{***}$ ) political participation. The only situational factors in this regression model, increasing the pressure of domestic work negatively influenced women's invisible political participation. However, that works positively influenced men's visible and invisible political participation.

**Table 3:** Effects of religiosity on the probability of participation in political activities for men and women.

Factors	Visible political participation		Invisible political participation	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	Beta coefficient	Beta coefficient	Beta coefficient	Beta coefficient
Age	0.001 (.005)	.184 (.003)	-0.201** (.007)	0.059 (.005)
Year of Schooling	0.185** (.011)	.168* (.007)	0.393*** (.017)	0.506*** (.014)
Employment Status	0.050 (.121)	.228*** (.064)	0.053 (.185)	0.253*** (.122)
Place of Residence	-0.123* (.106)	-.016 (.062)	-0.088 (.163)	-0.048 (.118)
Domestic Work	0.316*** (.003)	.010 (.002)	0.143* (.004)	-0.113* (.003)
Religiosity	-0.042 (.016)	-.274*** (.009)	0.173** (.025)	-0.292*** (.017)
Constant	1.062 (.278)	1.271 (0.196)	1.979 (.425)	3.240 (.373)
N	295	302	295	302
F	6.23***	11.87***	14.81***	96.77***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.116	0.195	0.220	0.663

Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression Models.

\* $P \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $P \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P \leq 0.001$ .

Numbers in parenthesis are standard errors

According to the regression results in Table 4, parental political engagement was a significant predictor of political participation for both men and women. Specifically, the finding indicates that parental political engagement positively influenced women's visible political activities ( $\beta = 0.414^{***}$ ) and invisible political activities ( $\beta = 0.502^{***}$ ). Even, after controlling for socioeconomic variables and religiosity. Surprisingly, religiosity still negatively influenced women's visible political activities ( $\beta = -0.173^*$ ) and invisible political activities ( $\beta = -0.169^{***}$ ), just like previous models. Religiosity, whereas, positively influenced men's invisible political participation.

**Table 4:** Effects of parental political participation on the probability of participation in political activities for men and women.

Factors	Visible political participation		Invisible political participation	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	Beta coefficient	Beta coefficient	Beta coefficient	Beta coefficient
Age	.031 (.004)	0.166 (.003)	-.162* (.006)	0.037 (.004)
Year of Schooling	.085 (.011)	-0.055 (.008)	.261*** (.015)	0.235*** (.012)
Employment Status	.000 (.115)	0.154** (.063)	-.012 (.165)	0.163*** (.101)
Place of Residence	-.095 (.100)	0.040 (.060)	-.051 (.144)	-0.081* (.002)
Domestic Work	.340*** (.002)	0.036 (.001)	.174** (.004)	0.019 (.096)
Religiosity	-.050 (.015)	-0.173* (.009)	.162** (.022)	-0.169*** (.014)
Parental Political Engagement	.345*** (.007)	0.414*** (.005)	.452*** (.011)	0.502*** (.007)
Constant	.382 (.285)	.704 (.211)	.510 (.407)	1.221 (.340)
N	295	302	295	302
F	11.39***	15.95***	28.51***	150.86***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.217	0.275	0.410	0.782

Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression Models.

\* $P \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $P \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P \leq 0.001$ .

Numbers in parenthesis are standard errors.

III.II Situational constraints on political participation

Table 5 and figure 1 both report significant mean differences in political participation between men and women based on different types of family arrangements. For measuring the mean difference between men and women, t-tests were carried out.

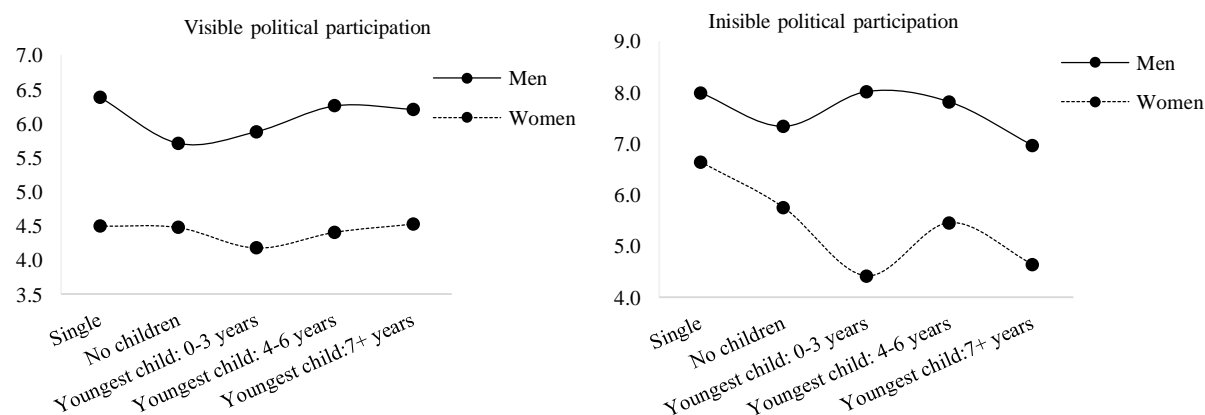
Overall, it is obvious that there is a significant mean difference in political participation between men and women. The mean differences between men and women positively affected both visible and invisible political participation. Table 5 indicates that in every level of family arrangement, men scored a higher mean level of participation than women. For more specific, women’s visible participation was highest when women were belonging to the family arrangement category of ‘Youngest child:7+ years’ with a mean score of 4.53 and participation was lowest when they were belonging to the category of ‘Youngest child:0-3 years’ with a mean score of 4.18. Likewise, considering invisible participation, women’s participation was lowest when they were belonging to the family arrangement category of ‘Youngest child:0-3 years’.

**Table 5:** Means scores and gender differences in political participation by levels of family arrangement; the significance of differences (independent-samples t-test).

Family arrangement	Men	Women	Diff. M-W <sup>a</sup>	t-value	P(t)
<i>Visible political participation</i>					
Single	6.39	4.50	1.89	2.99	0.004**
No Children	5.71	4.48	0.69	2.17	0.038*
Youngest child: 0-3 years	5.88	4.18	1.70	3.28	0.002**
Youngest child: 4-6 years	6.26	4.41	1.85	2.91	0.005**
Youngest child:7+ years	6.21	4.53	1.68	4.57	0.000***
<i>Invisible political participation</i>					
Single	8.00	6.65	1.35	2.55	0.016**
No children	7.34	5.76	1.58	2.78	0.007**
Youngest child: 0-3 years	8.02	4.42	3.60	7.24	0.000***
Youngest child: 4-6 years	7.82	5.46	2.36	3.95	0.000***
Youngest child:7+ years	6.97	4.65	2.32	6.22	0.000***
N	295	302			

\*P< 0.05, \*\*P<0.01, \*\*\*P<0.001.

<sup>a</sup>M=Men, W=Women



**Figure 1:** Predicted means differences in political participation for men and women by types of family arrangement.

Our findings reported in table 6 and figure 2 demonstrate that there was a significant mean difference between men and women’s political participation by different levels of domestic work. It also implies that men secured higher mean scores of participation compared to women, considering four different quartiles of domestic work. When women moving from ‘1st quartile’ to ‘4th quartile’ signified a change in values from 4.71 to 4.32 for visible political participation, 5.68 to 4.18 for invisible participation which indicates that increasing pressure of domestic work significantly reduced women’s political participation (figure 9).

**Table 6:** Means scores and gender differences in political participation by levels of domestic work; the significance of differences (independent-samples t-test).

Domestic work	Men	Women	Diff. M-W <sup>a</sup>	t-value	P(t)
<i>Visible political participation</i>					
1st quartile	6.08	4.71	1.37	3.37	0.001***
2nd quartile	6.19	4.39	1.80	4.40	0.000***
3rd quartile	6.36	4.23	2.13	3.01	0.006**
4th quartile	6.11	4.32	1.79	1.56	0.157

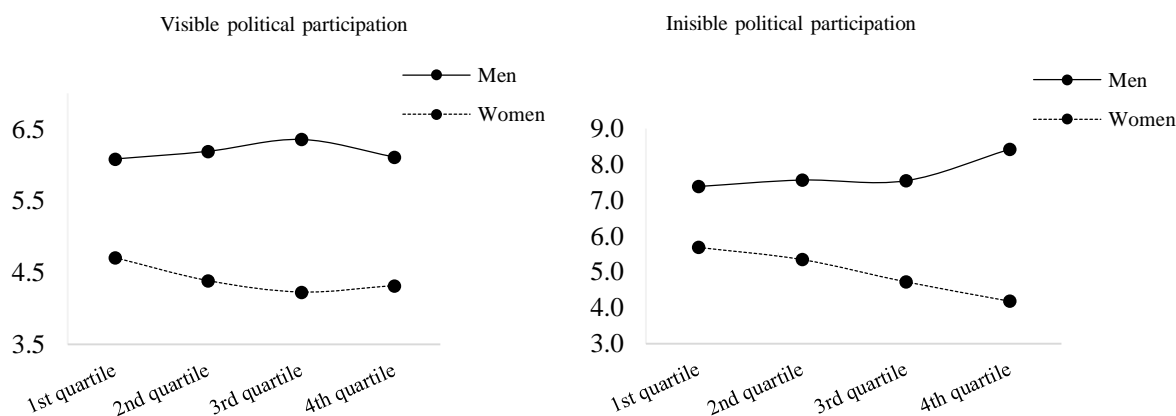
**Invisible political participation**

1st quartile	7.39	5.68	1.71	3.73	0.000***
2nd quartile	7.57	5.34	2.23	5.96	0.000***
3rd quartile	7.55	4.72	2.83	5.07	0.000***
4th quartile	8.42	4.18	4.24	4.78	0.000***
N	295	302			

Source: Authors' calculations based on the Field Survey, 2019

\*\* $P \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P \leq 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup>M=Men, W=Women



**Figure 2:** Predicted means differences in political participation for men and women by levels of domestic work.

#### IV. DISCUSSIONS

Overall, is there any gender gap in political participation? Do structural, situational, and cultural factors account for the sharp gender gap in political participation? In this study, the evidence has cleared that the gender gap is largely visible in the political participation of Bangladesh. Men are more active in any form of visible (attend a political meeting to volunteering for a party) and invisible political engagement (getting political information and talking about politics). Globally, it is acknowledged that men are more active in traditional time-consuming visible political activities<sup>7,14,29</sup> and invisible political activities compared to women<sup>3,15,18</sup>.

Education is the key agency of socialization that influences an individual's norms and values<sup>32</sup>. Meanwhile, education also ensures employment opportunity, social, leisure, cultural, and political participation. It is proved that higher education and employment are positively related to political engagement in reducing the gender disparity<sup>4,14,22,30</sup>. Likewise, in our study, year of schooling and employment status are the significant predictors of the gender gap, and especially increasing year of schooling and employment status is highly account for higher political participation of women. As the initial action towards political mobilization, women's active participation in political discussion are always pushed by their higher level of education<sup>3</sup>.

Gender disparities are highest among predominantly Islamic and Hindu societies<sup>19</sup>. Incredibly, the people of Bangladesh are highly religious-minded, especially women. The study findings indicate that women are less participate in political activities than men for every unit increase of religiosity. Moreover, religiosity positively influences on men's invisible political activities. Overall, it is really difficult for women to participate in any outside activities like political participation, which are against religious obligations. Besides, *Purdah* norms restricted Muslim women's mobility in the public domain<sup>17</sup>. Previous works of literature also reveal that religiosity promotes gender inequality in politics<sup>6,8</sup>.

Family is the most prevailing institution where a child's political disposition is nurtured in many ways initially. Traditional sex-role socialization in the area of politics discourages women's political engagement, in terms of interest, knowledge, and other activities<sup>1,9,10,29</sup>. However, the study shows that women are more active in politics compared to men when their parental political participation increases. The core reason can be the fact that men's political activeness not only depends on family but also on other social influences, whereas women's political development totally relies on parental active political engagement.

In this study, it is evident that situational constraints (family arrangement and domestic pressure) are still alive and confine women into households. Results from the study depict that women demonstrate a lower mean level of political engagement in comparison to men by considering levels of family arrangement, and domestic pressure. When women move from 'single' to 'couple with a 0-3 years' child' it implies a negative change in their mean level of political engagement. In Bangladesh, there is a traditional belief that women are born only for taking care of family and doing domestic work. They are overburdened with different household activities like cooking, take care of kids, washing, and teaching children, and so on. These uneven distributions of

domestic works and child-care responsibilities make women busy in the household and impede their involvement in the politics of the country. Therefore, many scholars explore domestic obligations as the main constraints of women's political engagement<sup>23,27,29</sup>.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is an undeniable fact that gender equality is almost necessary for all aspects of life. However, the current scenario of politics has witnessed that a woman does not get equal opportunities like men to participate in political activities. Moreover, among the illiterate and lower educated women, the possibility of public discussion and political analysis is lower than their counterparts. The gender gap, consequently, is largely visible in politics, and men are far more active compared to women. Besides, the pressure of domestic work and child-care responsibilities have confined women into households. Furthermore, religious obligations and traditional sex-role socialization are the main constraints for women to participate in any outside activities because both of them discourage women's political engagement.

Despite having a National Women Development Policy with some specific objectives, still, women's participation in politics, as well as development sectors, is not increasing at an expected rate. Thus, the study proposes the government's strict role in the proper implementation of this policy. It is also recommended that women's political engagement should increase for ensuring better accountability, decision-making, and proper utilization of human resources.

The present study hangs completely on quantitative analysis which may lose certain in-depth essences of this very precarious topic; whereas the qualitative approach may be a great substitute. Finally, it would have been better if more connections with other important variables could have been addressed, such as leisure activities, political environments, and so on. So, further research in this arena may devise in a wider angle of view to address some new dimensions.

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