

Terms of Reference

Research Study

Women's low participation in political decision-making and its implications for labour representation

Commissioned by: Karmojibi Nari (KN)

Country: Bangladesh

Year: 2026

Supported by: FES Bangladesh

1. Background and Rationale

Bangladesh has made significant progress in social, economic, and institutional development over the past decades. Women's participation in education, employment, social mobilization, and community-level initiatives has increased considerably. However, women continue to face persistent barriers to meaningful participation in political and public decision-making processes. Their representation in political parties, electoral processes, policy platforms, and leadership positions remains limited, reducing their influence over national priorities, law-making, governance reforms, and public policy decisions.

Political decision-making has a direct impact on labour rights, labour law reform, social protection, workplace safety, wage policy, gender equality, and workers' access to justice. When women's voices are weak or absent in political spaces, the specific concerns of women workers are less likely to be adequately reflected in policy debates and reform processes. This is particularly important in Bangladesh, where women workers make major contributions to the national economy, especially in labor-intensive sectors such as ready-made garments, informal work, domestic work, agriculture, care work, and other low-wage sectors.

At the same time, women often serve on the front lines of labour struggles, mobilizing workers, organizing communities, and sustaining collective action. Yet despite their visible and critical contributions, they remain underrepresented in trade union leadership and labour advocacy structures, where their voices are too often unrecognized and excluded from decision-making. Although women workers are central to Bangladesh's economic development, their participation in collective bargaining, union governance, labour negotiations, and rights-based advocacy remains constrained. Structural gender norms, patriarchal institutional cultures, limited access to leadership opportunities, lack of confidence-building support, unpaid care responsibilities, workplace insecurity, and male-dominated decision-making spaces continue to restrict women's active engagement in both political and labour spheres.

Women's underrepresentation in politics and women's limited leadership in trade unions are interconnected issues. Political parties, elected bodies, and public institutions play a critical role in shaping labour laws, workers' protections, social security systems, and accountability mechanisms. Similarly, trade unions and labour organizations play an important role in articulating workers' demands and influencing labour-related policy reforms. When women are marginalized in both spaces, women workers' priorities remain underrepresented in democratic governance and labour rights agendas.

Against this backdrop, the project seeks to commission a research study to examine the structural, institutional, social, and cultural barriers that limit women's participation in political decision-making in Bangladesh. The study will also assess how women's underrepresentation in political spaces affects labour-related policy priorities, women workers' concerns, inclusive governance, and the representative capacity of the trade union movement.

The findings of the study will support evidence-based advocacy, capacity strengthening, policy dialogue, and strategic engagement with political actors, women leaders, trade unions, civil society organizations, and relevant stakeholders. The research will generate practical recommendations for strengthening women's voice in both political and labour-related decision-making and contribute to more inclusive democratic structures in Bangladesh.

2. Overall Objective

The overall objective of this study is to generate evidence that supports to strengthen democratic structures in Bangladesh by promoting women’s active participation in political decision-making and advancing their leadership in the trade union movement.

Specifically, the study aims to:

Examine the structural, institutional, social, and cultural barriers that limit women’s participation in politics and political party decision-making in Bangladesh.

Assess how women’s underrepresentation in political spaces affects labour-related policy priorities, the articulation of women workers’ concerns, and inclusive governance outcomes.

Generate practical, evidence-based recommendations for strengthening women’s voice in both political and labour-related decision-making contexts.

3. Research Questions

3.1 Overall Research Question

What are the structural, institutional, social, and cultural barriers that limit women’s participation in political decision-making, and how do these barriers influence women’s leadership in trade unions, and underrepresentation affects labour-related policy priorities and women workers’ rights?

3.2 Specific Research Questions

- What is the current status of women’s participation in political decision-making at local, national, and political party levels?
- What structural, legal, and institutional factors restrict women’s meaningful participation in political parties and electoral processes in Bangladesh?
- What social and cultural norms, attitudes, and practices limit women’s access to leadership roles in political and labour institutions?
- What positive steps have been taken in existing policies and laws to support women’s participation and leadership in political parties and trade unions?
- What is the current state of women’s leadership in trade unions and labour advocacy bodies, and what barriers prevent their greater participation?
- How does women’s underrepresentation in political decision-making affect the formulation and implementation of labour laws, worker protection policies, and public investment priorities relevant to women workers?
- What policy, institutional, and programmatic interventions can most effectively advance women’s voice in political and labour decision-making in the Bangladesh context?

4. Scope of Work

The selected consultant or research firm will be required to undertake the following tasks:

4.1 Desk Review

- Review relevant national and international literature on women’s political participation, trade union leadership, gender and governance, and labour rights in Bangladesh.
- Analyse existing legal and policy frameworks, including the Constitution of Bangladesh, the Representation of the People Order, national gender policies, and labour legislation.
- Document global and regional good practices in advancing women’s political and labour leadership.

4.2 Primary Data Collection

- Conduct Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with political leaders, women politicians, party officials, trade union representatives, women labour activists, policymakers, civil society representatives, and development partners.
- Conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with women political front liners, women wing from national political parties and trade unions, and women community leaders.
- Undertake stakeholder consultations across relevant political and labour constituencies.

4.3 Analysis and Planning

- Analyse primary and secondary data to identify key barriers, drivers, and entry points for change.
- Map the political and institutional landscape as it relates to women’s participation and representation.
- Identify specific policy and programmatic gaps and opportunities.
- Develop practical, actionable recommendations tailored to the Bangladesh context.

4.4 Dissemination and Validation

- Present the draft findings, accompanied by a presentation (PPT) and background files for infographics, in a Stakeholder Validation Workshop to gather feedback and enrich analysis.
- Produce a final study report and a concise policy brief for advocacy and wider dissemination.

5. Methodology

The study will employ a mixed-methods approach that combines rigorous qualitative inquiry with relevant quantitative data analysis. The methodology will be guided by a gender-responsive and rights-based analytical framework. Key methodological components include:

5.1 Desk Review

A systematic review of academic literature, policy documents, national statistics, electoral commission data, parliamentary records, and international frameworks related to women’s political and labour participation.

5.2 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

In-depth semi-structured interviews with approximately 25–30 key informants drawn from the following groups:

- Women members of parliament
- Local government representatives
- Senior officials of major political parties
- Women political front liners and women wing from national political parties

- Trade union leaders (women and men)
- Women labour rights activists and advocates
- Representatives of relevant government ministries (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the Ministry of Labour and Employment), Election Commission and other relevant public institutions
- Representatives of development partners and civil society organizations
- Academic and policy experts on gender, governance, and labour

5.3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

A minimum of six (6) FGDs will be conducted with women workers, women trade union members, and women community leaders across selected geographic areas, ensuring representation from Dhaka and other relevant industrial or political districts.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to rigorous ethical standards including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymization of data, do-no-harm principles, and safe and respectful engagement with all research participants, particularly women in vulnerable situations.

6. Deliverables

The consultant or research firm will be responsible for producing the following deliverables within the agreed timeline:

Deliverable	Description	Timeline
Inception Report	Detailed methodology, refined research questions, data collection tools, work plan, and risk register	Within 5 days of contract signing
Draft Study Report	Full report with findings, analysis, case studies, tables, and annexes; accompanied by a presentation (PPT) and background files for infographics	Within 30 days of completing data collection
Stakeholder Validation Workshop	Facilitation of a multi-stakeholder workshop to validate and enrich draft findings; workshop report	Within 7 days of submitting draft report
Final Study Report	Revised final report (hard and soft copies) incorporating stakeholder feedback, with actionable recommendations	Within 10 days after the validation workshop
Policy Brief	A concise 4-page brief for advocacy and dissemination purposes	Submitted together with the Final Report

7. Study Locations

The study will be conducted across strategically selected geographic areas to ensure the findings reflect national, regional, and local dynamics. Proposed locations include:

- Dhaka (national capital – political institutions, national trade unions, parliament, party headquarters)
- Gazipur and Narayanganj (major industrial districts with significant women worker populations)

- Chattogram (second largest city; major port, industrial zone, and political hub)
- Additional districts as identified during inception phase, particularly those with active women’s political engagement

The final selection of study locations will be confirmed in the Inception Report in consultation with Karmojibi Nari (KN).

8. Eligibility Criteria

The consultant or research organisation must demonstrate the following:

- Proven experience in conducting applied research in the areas of women’s political participation, gender and governance, labour rights, or related fields in Bangladesh.
- Strong theoretical and practical understanding of gender equality, women’s political empowerment, and trade union dynamics.
- Demonstrated capacity in both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including KIIs, FGDs, and desk review.
- Proven ability to engage diverse and senior stakeholders, including politicians, government officials, trade union leaders, and civil society representatives.
- Experience in producing high-quality research reports and policy briefs for development audiences.
- Advanced English writing and communication skills; working proficiency in Bengali preferred.
- Understanding of ethical research standards and gender-sensitive research practices.

9. Assessment Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated against the following criteria:

Criteria	Points
Understanding of the study objectives and research context including methodology, study framework, and analytical approach	35%
Budget justification and value for money	30%
Study design and methodology: Comprehensiveness of approach; Validity of results as determined by methodology (35%).	35%
TOTAL	100

10. Expression of Interest – Required Information

All Expressions of Interest (EoI) must include the following:

- Proposed study title
- Technical proposal including proposed methodology, analytical framework, and study design
- Proposed study locations and justification
- Research dissemination and stakeholder engagement plan

- Detailed financial proposal with budget breakdown
- Demonstrated capacity to access data and engage key stakeholders (including written confirmation or evidence where applicable)
- Organisational or individual profile, including all relevant legal documents (registration certificate, tax compliance certificate, etc.)
- Profile of the research team, including CVs of all key team members

Note: Proposals will not be evaluated unless all required legal documents are submitted alongside the technical and financial proposals.

11. Study Timeline

The study is expected to commence in **the mid of October 2026** and will be completed within a total duration of 45 calendar days from the date of contract signing. The detailed work plan will be agreed and confirmed in the Inception Report.

#	Activity	Responsibility	Timeline
1	Contract signing and inception phase	Consultant / KN	Day 1–5
2	Desk review and literature analysis	Consultant	Day 3–10
3	Development and finalisation of data collection tools	Consultant / KN	Day 5–10
4	Primary data collection (KIs and FGDs)	Consultant	Day 10–25
5	Data analysis and report drafting	Consultant	Day 25–35
6	Submission of draft report	Consultant	Day 35
7	Stakeholder validation workshop	Consultant / KN	Day 38–40
8	Final report and policy brief submission	Consultant	Day 45

12. Proposal Submission

12.1 Submission Deadline

All proposals must be submitted electronically by:

Deadline: 20 August 2026, 11:59 PM (Bangladesh Standard Time)

12.2 How to Submit

Proposals must be submitted to the Procurement Committee by email or post:

Email: karmojibinpc@gmail.com, keeping cc arifaas.alam@fes.de

Post: Convener, Procurement Committee, Karmojibi Nari (KN), Regent Parbata Grand (Shuchona), 159/A, Senpara Parbata, Apt. No. 102 & 104, Mirpur-10, Dhaka-1216, Bangladesh

Subject line: Proposal Submission – Women’s Voice in Political and Labour Decision-Making Study

13. Contact for Clarifications

For any queries regarding these Terms of Reference, please contact:

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