

Women in Bangladesh: *agents of change and development*

Rabab Fatima
Ambassador of Bangladesh to Japan

I am the first Bangladeshi woman ambassador to Japan. There are many such 'firsts' happening to women in Bangladesh. For the first time there is a woman speaker, leader of the house, deputy leader of the house and the leader of the opposition in the nation's parliament. Successively since 1991, women have been elected as prime minister through popular voting. Women's political advancement is a reflection of the change in society as a whole. Women's participation in every sector has grown – from the highest echelons of the government, judiciary, and corporate houses, to the burgeoning self-employed women entrepreneurs in the remotest villages. Traditional societal mores have given way to pragmatic policies facilitating women's active participation in development. After all, half the population of the country cannot be left out of the development process and the ambitious plans to lift the country out of poverty towards a self-reliant, progressive Bangladesh. As Bangladesh advances, we are making sure that no one is left behind.

We have placed highest priority to mainstream women in the country's development process, prioritizing on women's education, and economic and social self-reliance. We have an ambitious and bold pro-women development strategy, which aims at ensuring equal opportunity for women. To support such measures, we have adopted gender responsive budgets. Women entrepreneurs receive industrial plots and funds at concessional rates from banks and non-bank financial institutions to set up business. Special funds are set aside to support income generating activities for rural and marginalized women. Bangladesh's success in pioneering microfinance programmes targeting the poor and marginalized women is globally recognized. These programmes have shown the credit worthiness and business acumen of women, and contributed significantly to changing the traditional mindset about the perceived role of women in society. Economic self-reliance have made them play a more active role on matters related to their lives and that of their families.

We believe that access to education is key to ensuring economic and social self-reliance. With that objective, we have invested heavily in girls and women's education. Education up to the tertiary level is free for girls and women. They receive free textbooks and stipends. We have earmarked 60% of teaching positions at the primary school level for women. These proactive policies and measures for girls' education have led to almost 100 percent enrolment rate at primary school and gender parity at primary and secondary school levels. In fact, literacy rate of women at 78% surpass that of men which is 75%. Bangladesh has topped the Global Gender Gap Index¹ in the primary and secondary education category.

Economic empowerment of women can make significant contributions to achieving gender equality. And for that we are laying emphasis on creating a conducive work environment for women by ensuring their security, providing them with accommodation facilities, as needed, and with crèche facilities, in and around their work places. Six months paid maternity leave are given for women in the public service. According to the World Bank, labour force involvement rate of women in Bangladesh stands at 57.60%².

Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of readymade garments in the world and women represent 90% of the 4 million strong workforce in that crucial sector. Participation of women is also growing in other sectors and professions, including in the civil service, the judiciary, armed forces and other technical professions. The print and electronic media are now vibrant with the presence of many women journalists. We have sportswomen excelling in cricket, football and even scaling the world's highest peak, Mount Everest. Women from Bangladesh are serving in UN peacekeeping operations, including in command positions; women are diplomats; fighter pilots; and leading business entrepreneurs.

Bangladeshi women are making important contribution to foreign exchange earnings through their remittance as women migrant workers in various parts of the world. Nearly 700,000³ such women are working abroad sending hard-earned remittances which is going towards educating their children and running their

¹ World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index 2017

² Bangladesh: Leading in Women Empowerment, Centre for Research and Information 2017

³ Bureau of Manpower, Employment & Training (BMET), Government of Bangladesh

families. Women in Bangladesh are truly breaking all barriers and are now active development agents in the nation-building process.

Strong social safety nets programmes have been initiated to ensure social inclusion, especially of the marginalized and vulnerable women, such as those with disabilities, aged, divorced women, widows or women-headed households. Innovative programmes such as, “One House, One Farm” have been launched which gives priority to female headed households, directly benefitting over 2.5 million rural women since it was initiated. These measures are certainly changing traditional mindsets and prejudices against women and empowering them.

Political empowerment is another area where we have made remarkable strides. We have some outstanding political role models in the country. Bangladesh is perhaps the only country in the world today that has a woman prime minister, and women holding the position of speaker, leader of the opposition, and leader and deputy leader of the parliament. In the current parliament, there are 72 women members of parliament, including the 50 reserved seats for women. It has been made mandatory for all political parties to ensure 33% women membership in their party committees by the year 2020. One-third or 33% seats are reserved for women in the local government bodies, with over 12,500 women serving in such bodies. These measures have led to an increase in women’s participation in politics and leadership roles, and earned global recognition. Bangladesh is ranked 7th in terms of political empowerment of women out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap (2017)⁴. Overall, Bangladesh’s ranking is 47th, outperforming its neighbours and many advanced economies and societies.

Our efforts have not gone unnoticed. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received a number of international awards, such as the ‘Global Women’s Leadership Award’ (2017) for her outstanding leadership for the advancement in women’s education and entrepreneurship, and the ‘Planet 50-50 Champion’ and ‘Agent of Change Award’ (2016) for her role in women’s empowerment. UNESCO honoured her with the ‘Tree of Peace’ (2014) award which was given for promoting girls’ education and empowerment.

⁴ World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2017

I am a product of the transformative Bangladesh where women are taking their rightful place in the development and progress of the country. I recognize the importance of the role of education and having access to opportunities which made my achievements possible. My generation has been fortunate to have strong and bold leadership that advanced women's rights and development. As we continue to break new barriers every day, we also recognize that much still remains to be done. Lingering cultural and social barriers need to be done away with. Further measures need to be taken to prioritize women in the labour market and into the mainstream workforce. Gender equality is a constitutional commitment for us, and our endeavours will continue until we achieve 50:50 participation of women alongside men in every sphere of life.