

# **10th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial Meeting**

## **Inaugural Ceremony**

Speech by

**Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina**

Honorable Prime Minister

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Bangabandhu International Conference Centre, Dhaka, Monday, 17 June 2013, 03 Ashar 1420

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Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Honorable Chairperson of the Meeting,  
Honorable Ministers from the Participating Countries,  
Participants from home and abroad,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu Alaikum and Good afternoon, everyone.

I would like to extend my warm greetings to the members of the Commonwealth Countries and to you who are attending at the inaugural ceremony of the 10<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial Meeting.

I understand, during the 3-day meeting, you will review the progress so far achieved in the commonwealth countries in ensuring women's economic, political and social empowerment and gender parity. I hope, at the end of the meeting, you would come out with the future course of action to face the challenges in mainstreaming women across the world.

The theme of this triennial Meeting is "Women's Leadership for Enterprise" is a time-befit and important to empowering women. I am convinced that the women's empowerment would be faster if we could establish women's leadership in the economic sector. However, it would not be so easy to accomplish in a patriarchal global society. We will have to formulate strategies taking this challenge into consideration.

Distinguished guests,

The progressive Bangalee Nation characteristically believes in equal rights of man and women. The Bangalee Female icons of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries including Begum Rokeya, Pritilata Waddedar, Begum Sufia Kamal, Ila Mitra are the inspiration to women's renaissance in Bangladesh. The women of this soil actively took part in the Language Movement of 1952, independence movement and the great Liberation War in 1971 to establish independent Bangladesh.

The greatest Bangalee of all times, the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave a solid foundation in the advancement of the Bangalee women. He guaranteed the rights of women to all spheres of life and equal opportunity in the constitution of Bangladesh in 1972. He also restored the equal rights of men and women. He introduced 15 reserved seats for women in the Parliament.

The present government has been following the principles of the Father of the Nation. We have ensured women's equal participation at all strata of the society. We have included women at the national level to local levels of the politics and economic decision making process. We have given priority to empower poor and disadvantaged women in the society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have increased women's reserved seats in the Parliament to 50. Presently, there are 70 women Members of Parliament which constitutes 20 percent of the total number of MPs.

Bangladesh has established a unique example in the democratic world in achieving political empowerment of women. The leader of the House of Parliament and head of the government is a

woman. The Deputy Leader and the Opposition Leader of the House are women. And the Speaker of the Parliament is also a woman.

In the Cabinet, Prime Minister and other 5 Ministers are women. Some 14 thousand and 200 women have been elected at the various tiers of the Local Government and they have been rendering services to the local people. This achievement in politics has been contributing to empower women in other areas including economic sector too.

The women of Bangladesh are working as judges in the highest court of the land. They have been working as permanent secretaries. They serve in the armed forces, police, bank, business houses, administration and everywhere alongside men. Women are working as peacekeepers in the UN Peace Mission. We have maintained reserved quota for women in the public services. In the appointment of primary school teachers, 60 percent quota has been reserved for women.

We have formulated the National Women Development Policy. Various organizations have been implementing different programs for the development of womenfolk in the society.

We have included gender issues in the development programs to empower women in all spheres of life. We have ensured women's participation in the decision making process at the national, local and grass-root levels. We have improved the gender management system. Special allocations have been given to ensure gender parity. On average, 28 percent of the national budget has been spending for women's development. We have increased maternity leave to six months with full pay.

The government has strengthened the Social Safety Net Programs and included increasing number of vulnerable women in the programs. Some 3.3 million poor destitute, widow and aged women are getting monthly allowances. Their food security is being ensured. Over 200,000 poor pregnant women and working lactating mother are also getting monthly allowances. Steps are taken to bring the physically challenged women as a part of the society. For creating self-employment, the destitute women are being provided with up to Tk, 15,000 as soft loan. 920,000 such women are now enjoying the credit facilities. It helped them to get rid of poverty.

In Bangladesh, women's education has gotten a new height in recent years. The girl students up to the secondary level are provided with stipends. Text books are being distributed to all students up to secondary level at free of cost. Female students up to the higher secondary level do not have to pay tuition fee. A prudent Education Policy has been formulated giving priority to female education. We, therefore, ensured gender parity in education. We have also taken various steps including setting up exclusive colleges, universities and institutes to spur the scope for women's education.

The rate of women's education has been increasing rapidly. It helped them eliminate social hurdles. Their living standard has been improved substantially. They gained confidence in their abilities. Incidences of exploitation have been reduced. Women are now playing a leadership role in all spheres of the society including the economic field. They are contributing more purposefully to the agricultural development. Bangladesh, therefore, has become the role model in women empowerment across the world.

The present government has set up about 15 thousand community clinics at villages and health services centers at the union level, the lowest tier of the local government. The rural women are getting nutritional and family planning services from the clinics besides getting treatment and medicare facilities. We have introduced midwifery training to selected women and posted them at the health complexes. We have ensured vaccination for all children. As a result, the child and maternal mortality rates have sharply been reduced even reached below the MDG targets. The United Nation, therefore, gave us MDG Award. Bangladesh was also awarded South-South medal for introducing ICT services in the healthcare especially for women and children.

Women are now engaged in self-employment-driven economic activities. For this, the government is giving them training and capital. Training centers have been constructed at each district and sub-district. Computer and ICT training are being given to educated women. The voluntary women organizations are on behalf of the government providing support to small and marginal women entrepreneurs at grass-root level. As a result, individual and group-based women entrepreneurships at local levels have been developed. Sales and display centers were constructed in the capital for promoting marketing their products.

Women entrepreneurs are enjoying special support to set up small and medium industries. Help Centers have been established in each district for women entrepreneurs. They are being trained in various trades including fashion and design, beautification, catering, pottery and business management. About 47 thousand women SME entrepreneurs have taken loan amounting to Tk. 55.44 billion with reduced interest rate. Women entrepreneurs are getting loan up to Tk. 2.5 million without collateral. 10 percent industrial plots at the state-owned industrial estates are reserved for women entrepreneurs. We have introduced National SME women entrepreneur award to bring dynamism amongst them.

A huge number of women entrepreneurs are developed in the country. They are also exporting their produce. The women are also investing their creativities in business houses and services sector despite a general unwillingness to embrace women's ability. A few of very successful entrepreneurs present here in the meeting.

The government has enacted Women and Children Repression Prevention Act to stop all forms of violence against women and children. The government has also enacted the Domestic Violence Protection and Prevention Act and Human Trafficking Prevention and Protection Act.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite multi-faceted challenges, women across the world are progressing. However, the pace of the development is very slow. In the developed world also women have been encountering discrimination in getting jobs, salaries and other benefits. They are facing religious and social extremism. Commonwealth Secretariat since 1985 has been contributing to restoring women's rights and establishing gender parity in the Commonwealth through convening this ministerial meeting. I would like to thank them for their continuous effort to this end.

In ensuring women's rights, we will have to be vocal in and outside our national territories. We will have to formulate coordinated and united strategies to achieve our goal. The activities of the women in the global arena should be strengthened. Bangladesh is committed to accelerating such international initiatives.

Bangladesh is a promoter to establish world peace. For this, ensuring socio-economic and political empowerment of women is imperative. Commonwealth countries should exchange their experiences regularly for exploring effective strategies to this end.

I hope, we will get some important recommendations from the Ministerial meeting which will ease challenges of women entrepreneurs across the world.

With this hope, I do hereby declare the 10<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial meeting open.

Thank you.

Khoda Hafez.

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu  
May Bangladesh Live Forever.