

Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

**Mr/Madame Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Assalamu Alaikum and a very good afternoon to you all.

I am happy to be here today to speak about “Empowerment of Rural Women”, an issue close to my heart and to the fundamental values of our state. We are pleased to co-sponsor this event with our trusted development partner, the Royal Dutch Government, with whom we are partnering to empower the women of Bangladesh.

I thank the World Food Program and the United Nations Women for organizing this event. WFP has consistently provided food and nutritional security to our ultra poor and the most vulnerable women, while UN Women have actively partnered with us in gender mainstreaming and empowerment of women and children.

Mr/Madame Chairperson,

The World Poverty and Hunger Report 2010 and Food and Agriculture Organization indicate 1.34 billion people worldwide live under US \$ 1.25 or less a day, while 1.02 billion suffer from malnutrition. Of the ultra poor population, nearly 70% are women and children usually due to conflict and inequitable economic systems. It is imperative that we right this colossal wrong and make our world a fairer place for all.

In Bangladesh, we celebrate empowerment of women in every walk of life. Our inspiration comes from the Father of the Nation and my father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who envisioned a Bangladesh where women would have equal rights with men. I have rededicated my government to the fundamental values Bangladesh fought its war of independence for, namely democracy, secularism, justice, equality, and fulfillment of the socio-economic aspirations of every woman and man. We also want to honor those 200,000 women who sacrificed their dignity for liberty and freedom during the war of independence.

Thus, the Bangladesh Constitution enshrines “Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life”. It is also why our government policies put women’s empowerment at the center of our development agenda. We believe that reducing hunger and poverty is indelibly interlinked achieving gender parity and empowerment of women, and better maternal health.

Therefore, our efforts have focused on women’s political, economic, and socio-cultural empowerment, especially at the grass root level. Our National Women Development Policy has provisions for education, health and employment security, all policies which are also reflected in our “Vision – 2021” aimed at transforming Bangladesh into a middle income country by 2021. A separate Ministry for Women together with Food, Agriculture, Local Government, and Health are making integrated policy measures for food and nutrition security of rural women.

Our strategy has been to champion political and economic empowerment of Bangladesh’s rural women. We believe that better socio-economic involvement sets the necessary preconditions for ensuring the women’s access to food and services, It also gives the women better access to resources, boosts self confidence, and reduces the feminization of poverty.

To ingrain political empowerment, my government's affirmative action has led to the election of 12,828 women to reserved seats in local government and 64 members in the parliament. In addition to the Prime Minister, we also have five women cabinet ministers (in charge of Agriculture, Home, Foreign Affairs, Women and Children Affairs, and Labor). The Opposition Leader as well as the Deputy Leader of the Parliament and the party Whip are also women.

To ensure economic empowerment, our government has stepped up its program of providing micro-credit loans to poor women. This allows the women to enjoy the fruits of their own labor. Bangladesh with a population of 150 million is on the way to becoming self sufficient in food. Women have a significant contribution in this success. Our government is facilitating rural women's access to agricultural technologies and loans for agro-processing, homestead gardening, nurseries, bee-keeping, and other activities. Our "One House- One Farm" program, giving priority to women households in every village, have been making enormous difference in the household food security of marginal and landless farmers, of whom 50 % are women. These women also have control over their household budget and are able to give their children better nutrition.

However food security in rural households does not always ensure nutrition security, especially if female members of families do not have knowledge of balanced diet. Therefore, our government is implementing Micronutrient Supplementation (MS) and National Nutrition Programs (NNP) for rural women through satellite community nutrition centers run by female community nutrition workers. Under NNP, Vitamin A capsules and iron-folate supplementations are distributed regularly throughout the country.

Since education is also a very powerful tool for empowering women, we are providing girls with free education up to Class 12. We also give stipends to girls in rural secondary schools, and are now planning to provide free tuition to them up to degree level.

Our government has also launched innovative livelihood projects for women's employment. Some creative examples are: The Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets, or REOPA, which employs rural women in road maintenance and flood repair works and Char Development Projects. We also have 92 Women Market Sections (WMS), for women traders where 500 women have been allotted shops as Female Shop Owners.

The evaluation of REOPA has revealed the following:

- While 97 % of women reported not having enough daily food prior to their REOPA employment, 87 % said they never faced a day of food shortage since;
- 84 % of women have food security. These women and their children are ensured full and balanced diet with acceptable calorie, protein, and micronutrient intake.
- 99 % of the women now fully control their income.
- Use of hygienic slab latrines has increased from 50% to 83 %.
- Only 37 % of women owned a house before the project. Now 64% of REOPA's crew group members live in their own houses.
- 48 % women instead of 15 % sought medical treatment from a licensed physician.

Our government has also initiated and expanded social safety nets for the vulnerable and marginalized in our society. In collaboration with the World Food Program, we run the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), the country's largest social safety net, directly assisting 750,000 extremely poor women with food, and training in income generating activities. To reduce feminization of poverty, we also have other social safety nets in place like widow allowance to 92,000 women, and the allowance for destitute women, and women with disabilities.

Mr/ Madame Chairperson,

Today, Bangladesh is globally acclaimed for its many achievements in empowering rural women. As recognition for our national efforts in reducing child mortality, we were given the UN Award for MDG-4 during last year's UNGA Session. Last year we also achieved MDG-5 by reducing our Maternal Mortality Rates by two-thirds. We are certainly on track to achieve many of the women empowerment and health related MDGs. Bangladesh is thus dubbed by the Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki Moon as a "rising star" in women's empowerment, a "model member state" in attaining key women related development goals, and for presenting the United Nations with its first and only all women police unit for its peacekeeping mission to Haiti.

Nevertheless, if we are to attain the MDGs by the stipulated 2015, we will have to work even harder, especially in the face of the challenges rising from the impact of global economic recession, world food insecurity, and particularly climate change.

Meanwhile, we thank the World Food Program, our development partners and other international organizations for their consistent support in partnering with us, in improving the living standards of rural women. If the developed world only keeps its promises made at Monterrey, the UN Millennium Summit and the LDC VI in Istanbul, our efforts will result in quick success. I believe that the world has a moral and ethical obligation to rescue and raise the poor women of the world from their dire straits.

I thank you all.

Khoda Hafez!
Joi Bangla! Joi Bangabandhu!
May Bangladesh Live Forever!