



**Statement by
Meher Afroze Chumki, MP; Hon'ble Minister of State, Ministry of
Women and Children Affairs to the Government of the People's
Republic of Bangladesh at UN CEDAW Meeting**

Madam Chair and learned members

Bangladesh was proclaimed independent on 26 March 1971 by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Following a nine-month-long war of independence, our victory was achieved on 16 December 1971. Bangladesh is located in South Asia with an area of 147570 square kilometres and a population of 160 million. Almost half of the population are women. The provision of equal rights for men and women has been incorporated in our Constitution immediate after independence.

Bangladesh signed many international human rights conventions, treaties, agreements and instruments, endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action and adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, 2000.

We are pledge-bound to implement the CEDAW upholding our Constitutional obligation. We have a target of transforming Bangladesh under the visionary leadership of Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed economy by 2041. We believe that we cannot achieve the desired level of development discarding the womenfolk that constitutes half of the population. Hence, while making enactments and framing policies, we emphasise on mainstreaming the women population in development. We have taken massive steps towards developing the socioeconomic condition of women, paving the way for flourishing women leadership, alleviating their poverty and expanding their education.

Madam Chair

The annual budget that our honourable Finance Minister presented for 2016-17 fiscal is titled 'Marching towards Growth, Development and Equitable Society'. At present gender budget is prepared for 40 ministries although initially the number was 10. These ministries are accountable to show the impacts made towards women development owing to their expenditure.

Many of the development programmes that we undertook in different sectors during the last seven years are the brain-child of the honourable Prime Minister; these have come to be recognised as "Sheikh Hasina's Special Initiatives". Among these, social safety programmes and women empowerment are the most conspicuous ones. It is to be specially noted that the majority of the beneficiaries of social safety net programmes are women. The Seventh Five-Year Plan has been prepared prioritising the establishment of a society of gender equality and development of women. We prepared our National Women Development Policy in 1997 and updated it in 2011 which is the foremost charter for the emancipation of women. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs is working to implement this policy setting short, medium and long-term targets.

Madam Chair

It is pleasing to note that among the Developing Countries, Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in many areas of MDGs. In particular, we have fully attained the targets in reducing poverty gap, poverty rates as well as the number of children suffering from malnutrition, ensuring gender parity in primary and secondary education, reducing under-five child mortality rate and preventing various diseases including HIV and tuberculosis.

Besides, substantial progress has been made in ensuring primary education enrolment, reducing child and maternal mortality, expanding the coverage of immunization and preventing contagious diseases.

In continuation of the MDGs, in the 70th UN session 193 countries including Bangladesh adopted the post-2015 Development Agenda containing 17 goals and 169 targets. We have incorporated the SDGs in our Seventh Five-Year Plan. In this regards, ministry/division-wise goals and targets have already been identified. Formulation of action plan to implement the SDGs is underway.

We are attaching the highest priorities to spreading women's education and alleviating their poverty. Ministry of Education has formulated some women friendly policies that provided stipend to girls at different educational levels.

Nearly two million students have been brought under the coverage of stipend. About 33 crore free textbooks have been distributed among students in the beginning of the academic year. It is true that women lag behind in higher education and they make up the greater of the two parts of dropouts. To prevent this trend, we have introduced mid-day meals in poverty-prone areas. Separate toilets have been provided for girl students at every school. There are two universities in the country earmarked for the higher education of the women. This is in addition to the existing provision of coeducation at other academic institutions.

Madam Chair

Women's presence has been remarkably enhanced in government and non-government employments. Alongside open competition, 10% quota has been reserved for appointment of women to gazetted posts and 15%, to non-gazetted posts.

In primary schools, 60% posts are reserved for appointment of women candidates. In Bangladesh, women's engagement is evident everywhere. Their participation has been enhanced at the upper echelons including Secretary to the Government, Judge of the Supreme Court, Vice Chancellor of a university and Ambassador. Female soldiers have

been lauded for their performance in the Army, Navy and Air Force. Along with other forces, women from Bangladesh are performing responsibly in peacekeeping missions.

We understand that a woman's status is enhanced in the family if she has an income and importance is given to her in decision-making. There are 8 million hands working in our garments sector. They are making significant contributions to our economy. The Government is engaged in creating congenial atmosphere for them and protecting their rights. In order to resolve their accommodation crisis, the government is constructing hostels for them at its own initiative. In addition, the Government is facilitating the development of small entrepreneurs.

Madam Chair

The Labour Rules, 2015 provides for one third representation of women in labour representation committees of enterprises where at least one third labourers are women. To attract women in non-traditional skills, Skills for Employment Investment Programme (SEIP) under Finance Division has targeted at least 30% female of 260,000 trainees to be trained on market responsive skills by the end of December 2017. Bangladesh under Ministry of Education focuses on building the skills of workers in potential growth sectors. Out of 65,000 trainees of SEP-B, 60% will be women. Supporting the disadvantaged group is a major task of Skills and Training Enhancement Project. For increasing female student enrollment in technical and vocational education, female quota has been increased from 10% to 20%. At present female enrollment is 25.71% but government has developed national strategies for the improvement of gender equality.

Women's participation in the labor market shows changes in the positive direction. Women's participation in the agriculture has increased mainly because of women's low skills, proximity and migration of male member to urban areas or abroad. Women's participation in industry and service also improved. Since 1991 to 2016 a total of

516,021 women are working abroad (18 countries) of which 60034 women are working presently.

Minimum wage has been declared for 38 sectors since 2009. Over the time wage difference has been declined and in the urban area it is about 92% but the gap in rural areas is higher. The Government has initiated monitoring of wages, particularly in public sector construction work.

The Labour Policy 2013 states that women's participation in the labour market and minimum wage standard will be ensured and gender based wage differentials will be reduced. The Policy commits for reducing all discrimination against women in the work place, ensuring safe, healthy and women friendly work environment, and provision of occupational health and safety and maternal safety measures. It provides for formulation of laws to protect informal workers and to ensure compliance of corporate social responsibility. Maternity leave has been increased to 6 months for working mothers in the public sector. Bangladesh Labour Act (amendment) 2013, covered maternity leave of 16 weeks (8 weeks before and 8 weeks after child birth), maternity benefits, non discriminatory wage structure, prohibition of any form of discrimination against women workers and prohibition of women working between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. without consent.

Madam Chair

Economic empowerment of women has gained momentum in Bangladesh in the recent years. Being engaged in readymade garments sector, nearly 4 million women are contributing effectively towards our GDP. Bangladesh Bank is providing collateral free loan up to Tk2.5 million for women entrepreneurs. Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) has disbursed Tk3939 crore to them. Bangladesh Bank has also allocated 15% of the funds of the refinancing scheme for women. Special desks dedicated for women

entrepreneurs have been opened in every bank and non-bank financial institutions. Micro Credit Disbursement Policy facilitates women entrepreneurs to borrow up to Tk50 thousand. In allocating industrial plots and small entrepreneurs' fund, 10% quotas have been reserved for women entrepreneurs by Bangladesh Bank. Women entrepreneurs having a small capital are getting support from loans distributed among the volunteers of Women Associations. To further promote women entrepreneurship, an initiative called "Joyeeta" was launched in 2011. Now it has been turned to Joyeeta Foundation. Cafe Joyeeta rehabilitates the women victims of trafficking. 'Searching Joyeeta' (victorious) in five categories has been initiated to award successful women chosen from across the country. 'Sonar Tory', 'Angona' and 'Unmesh' have been opened as sales and display centres to promote women entrepreneurs. An amount of Tk10-15 thousand is being distributed among 0.148 million distressed women with 5% service charge in all 64 districts.

Madam Chair

Owing to effective measures taken by the Government, Bangladesh has succeeded in alleviating women's poverty and emerged as a role model in this field. I would like to highlight some of our pragmatic initiatives taken to reduce poverty. In general, poverty has been reduced from 30% to 24.3%; the trend of reduction is in progress at a faster rate.

Nearly 0.18 million families have been rehabilitated at an expense of Tk90.86 million from Shelter Project while 7.5 million families have benefitted from One-House-One-Farm Project. In addition, 87346 landless families have been provided with 40,100 acres of government agricultural land. On the other hand, 36 cluster villages have been established in 102 upazilas of 49 districts for rehabilitation of 6202 landless families. In 252 cluster villages, 10650 women have been rehabilitated. Landless families totalling 11298 have been rehabilitated in 19903 acres of land on river-banks. Pucca houses have been built for 50 thousand rootless and homeless people in coastal areas. Under Cluster

Village Project, 1845 women have been settled in land given to them with houses built on it.

Sewing machines are being distributed to the distressed and helpless women for self-employment. Haor infrastructure and Livelihood Improvement Project gives livelihood protection to 59530 women beneficiaries. Rural Employment and Road Maintenance Programme provides jobs to 59180 rural destitute women. Fair price card system has been introduced for 25 lakh extremely poor families being headed by or giving priority to women. Food grains are sold to poor women at a nominal price through Open Market Sales Programme.

Madam Chair

Vulnerable Group Development VGD is the largest social safety net program and its activity predominantly focuses on the nutritional status of malnourished women and children. The number of beneficiaries under this program is 1 million poor rural women. Half a million mothers are getting maternal allowance at the rate of taka 500 per month. Lactating mother allowances are given to one hundred eighty thousand beneficiaries at the rate of Taka 500 per month. Some other ministries are also running different programs for the women under social safety net programs.

These are widow allowances, disability allowances, freedom fighter allowances and allowances for dalit, transgender and elderly people. Bangladesh spends as much as 4.7 billion Dollar per year under social safety net program.

Day Care Centre for the children of low and middle income working mother are another important program of DWA has established forty five Day Care Centers for the children of working mothers in Dhaka city and district level. Children from six months to six years can stay in these day cares from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. In these centers they get dresses, food education, medicare, amusements etc. Beside this Ministry of Social Welfare has

established a day care center at Azimpur in Dhaka. The seat capacity of the centre is 50. The total number of beneficiary of this centre is 8282 (up to March/2015).

“Empowerment of Girls and Boys” program covers 7 districts from 7 divisions of the country. 379 adolescent clubs formed in each union in all upazilas of those districts. The main objective of this program is to create a favorable environment for development of adolescent life, establish their rights and to build a non-discriminatory, protective society through increase life skills of adolescent girls and boys. Total adolescent clubs members are 11,370.

There are 17,378 registered Women volunteer organizations under the Department of Women Affairs. District and upazila DWA officers are engaged to make aware the members of this registered organization about combating trafficking, child marriages, birth registrations, marriage registration, dowry, domestic violence, sexual harassment, HIV/AIDS, community meeting and courtyard meeting. At field level district and upazila DWA officers also motivate the members of DWA volunteer organizations, beneficiaries of VGD program and the women who get maternity and lactating mother allowance.

Madam Chair

The Government of Bangladesh has a Constitutional obligation to secure medical care to its citizens. The present Government attaches particular emphasis on improving women's health. Our present maternal mortality ratio is 1.94 (per 1000 live birth) and adolescent birth rate is 83 (per 1000 girls), While crude death rate is 5.5, crude birth rate (per 1000 persons) is 19.2, of which rural is 19.3 and urban is 18.2. The rate of births attended by skilled health personnel (%) is 42.1 (BDHS 2014), 42 (UN 2014). Our antenatal care coverage (at least 4 visits) is 31.2 (BDHS 2014). We have more than 13500 community clinics at rural level. A 100-bed specialised diabetic, endocrine and metabolic

hospital has been established in Dhaka for women and children. Another 150-bed specialised cardiac hospital has been established for women and children. Women-friendly hospitals have been established at 10 districts and 3 upazila health complexes. Maternal Health Voucher Scheme at the rate of Tk2000 has been introduced for 0.175 million pregnant women in 53 upazilas. Primary health, nutrition and family planning services are ensured for 32 million women through 13500 community clinics. A total of 22.5 million women are receiving nutritional service through strengthening of community based nutrition programme. Emergency anti-natal care is provided to 2.89 million pregnant mothers through upazila health complexes and 97 women and children welfare centres. Awareness raising programmes have been enhanced on prevention of biased attitude, development of reproductive health, family planning, gender and development or IV/AIDS and so on through radio and television.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has developed a comprehensive Plan of Action for the period of 2011-2016 for Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health in line with the National Maternal Health Strategy and the National Reproductive Health Strategy. The Plan of Action focuses on:

- Counseling and developing awareness of adolescents on personnel hygienic practices, nutrition, puberty, anaemia, RTI/STI, unprotected sexual and reproductive health services, violence and sexual abuse;
- Training adolescents on sexual and reproductive health through peer groups;
- Syndromic management of RTI/STDs, awareness creation on HIV/AIDS and condom promotion for married adolescents;

Madam Chair

Our Government has put utmost importance to developing a Digital Bangladesh by 2021. Our Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy of 2009 focuses on gender as a theme cross-cutting issues. Basic ICT literacy training courses for women have been

organised for 20000 female professionals. About 9000 female participants have got training on 'Top up Foundation Skill Training Course' under ICT Division. About 1000 women at grassroots level have received training under the National Mobile Application Development Awareness Capacity Building Programme, Under 'One Family One Woman: Empowering Women through ICT' project, about 20000 freelancers are expected to become entrepreneurs in the ICT service sector. Access to Information (A2I) Programme of Prime Minister's Office has established 4547 union digital centres (UDC) of which the entrepreneurs are women.

A total of 8500 rural post offices have been digitised under Post e-Centre for Rural Community Project. About 2000 women entrepreneurs are working in these post e-centres. Under 'Totthyo Apa' (information sister) project, information centres have been established in 10 upazilas. The Ministry of Science and Technology has provided 3044 fellowships to women.

Madam Chair

Bangladesh has created a model in the world in the field of women leadership. In Bangladesh, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House, the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the House are women; they have been also nominated for the positions of Whip or Chairperson of a Parliamentary Standing Committee. In addition to the provision of contesting for general seats, 50 out of 350 seats in the Parliament are reserved for women. In order to promote women leadership at the grassroots level, one-third of the seats have been kept reserved for women candidates in elections to local bodies. Contesting in the latest elections, 13000 out of 60000 women have been returned to local bodies. A provision has been made requiring political parties to include one third post for women at various levels of their committees by 2020. Women Development Forum has been formed to enhance the capacity of selected women representatives at the sub-district level.

Owing to our tireless efforts, our real GDP growth is going to reach the seven percent mark this fiscal year finally surpassing the six percent growth trajectory. Moreover, despite global economic adversities, Bangladesh has made remarkable strides towards socioeconomic progresses during the last seven years. With increase in per capital GDP, poverty has declined significantly during this period. At the same time, we have achieved enviable progress in many social indicators. Specially, in terms of human development index, we are now at par with the countries having per capita income twice as big as ours. As a result of stable economic growth, Bangladesh has graduated to the status of lower middle-income country.

Madam Chair

Like many other countries, Bangladesh is faced with issues of immigration and undocumented citizens coming from other countries. On many occasions people are forced to leave their homeland due to internal disturbances, external aggression or differences of political ideology or religious believes. Over a long period of time Muslim nationals of Myanmar commonly known as Rohingyas are pushed into Bangladesh. It has been a painstaking tusk for Bangladesh to take care of these undocumented Myanmar citizens. The Government has already conducted a survey of undocumented Myanmar Nationals (Muslims from Myanmar's Rakhine State, known as Rohingyas), including their children, living inside Bangladesh territory. The survey would help determine the approximate number and exact location/concentration of the undocumented Myanmar National, reportedly spread over few districts.

In the meantime, the Government has taken measures to streamline the provision of humanitarian assistance to the undocumented Myanmar Nationals, through the involvement of the International Organizations for Migration (IOM) and some local and international NGOs. The aforementioned survey would also help further customize the provision of humanitarian assistance to the concerned populations, as well as their host communities. Along with health care services, the Government has decided to extend

family planning support to the target population.

Bangladesh is not a Party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Additional Protocol. However, Bangladesh has all along adhered to the fundamentals of the international protection standards emanating from these two instruments. It needs to be flagged that Bangladesh has hosted a huge number of Myanmar Refugees for over three decades without sufficient international burden sharing and any meaningful international efforts to bring this protracted refugees situation to a feasible and sustainable solution.

However, office of the RRRC (Rohinga Refugee Repatriation Commissioner) is working together with local administration and local government institutions providing various supports and security to the refugee in Cox's Bazar.

Madam Chair

Despite these noteworthy achievements, some challenges are impeding our initiatives of women development. We are yet to succeed in preventing violence to women and stopping child marriage. Our women are subjected to trafficking. We are yet to establish the principle of equality in securing property rights to women or giving them equal wage for doing the same task undertaken by their male counterparts. However, we have delved deep into the problems and identified their root causes. We have noticed that women are often subjected to perpetration very much in their own families. Therefore, updating the previous acts, we enacted The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in 2013. Measures have been taken to hold the trial of sensational cases of violence against women in special tribunals. Assistance is rendered to oppressed women under a multi-sector project. Through one-stop crisis centres operating at 8 medical colleges across the country, victims are given medical care and psychological counselling services and provided legal assistance and subsistence for six months from

under a single umbrella, the cost of which is borne by the Government. In order to render assistance to oppressed women, we have introduced a toll-free line opened round the clock through which the victims can report their complaints. This toll-free number will be mentioned in the textbooks of National Curriculum and Textbooks Board from this year. Apart from this, we have taken various programmes to raise awareness about violence against women.

The National Women Development Policy 2011; the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000; the Dhaka Metropolitan Ordinance of 1976; the Pornography Act, 2012; the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010; and the Penal Code of 1860 provide various provisions to prevent sexual violence against children, including girls. The Executive Magistrates were given power to take steps under section 509 of the Penal Code in the schedule of the Mobile Court Act, 2009 to prevent sexual harassment of girls and women. The High Court in its judgment and directives on 14 May 2009 also provided some specific guidelines to prevent sexual harassment against girls and women in workplaces and educational institutions.

A host of measures are being taken to protect girls and women from sexual violence both within and outside marriage through, *inter alia*, awareness development programmes implemented through school teachers, and peer education and orientation programmes with focus on adolescent girls and boys.

The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has issued a number of circulars directing the Deputy Commissioners and Upazila Nirbahi Officers to strengthen the enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Dowry Prohibition Act. The Inter-Ministerial Committee headed by Hon'ble State Minister for Women and Children Affairs provides overall guidance to prevent dowry and create mass awareness in this regard.

In terms of institutional measures, the line Ministry has also established the National Forensic DNA Laboratory in Dhaka and seven divisional DNA laboratories in Rajshahi,

Chittagong, Sylhet, Barisal and Khulna, under the auspices of the Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Woman.

In order to stop child marriage, we have framed a new law updating the Prevention of Child Marriage Act of 1929 which is now awaiting the approval of the Cabinet. You may know that the honourable Prime Minister is strongly committed to end child marriage in Bangladesh. In 2014 Girl Summit in London, she expressed her time-bound commitment to end marriage for children under the age of 15 by 2021 and under 18 by 2041. She also pledged to reduce the number of girls getting married between 15 and 18 by more than one-third by 2021. Prime Minister's office is taking special initiative to reduce child marriage. To realise the honourable Prime Minister's commitment, my Ministry has drafted the 2015-2021 five-year National Plan of Action to reduce child marriage in Bangladesh by addressing all the relevant issues associated with this.

Madam Chair

The Governments of Bangladesh and India cooperate on prevention of trafficking in persons, including women and children, through a bilateral institutional mechanism in place. The Joint Taskforce on Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation and Reintegration (RRRI) has developed a set of Standard Operating Procedures for guiding cooperation on prevention of trafficking in persons, including children. The RRRI Taskforce collaborates with NGOs for the protection of victims of trafficking. A Victim's Database on rescued and repatriated trafficked victims has been maintained by RRRI Task Force with joint support of MoHA and UNICEF funded project.

An MoU on Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation and Integration (RRRI) of victims of human trafficking, especially women and children, has been signed during the visit of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India on 6-7 June 2015 in Dhaka.

In 2015, 2464 cases of repatriation were sent from different sources and 780 women and children were repatriated. Protection and rehabilitation of the trafficking victims has been taken as an important agenda and implemented in collaboration with NGOs. Bangladesh National Women lawyers Association runs a shelter home for victims of trafficking. Bangladesh is now in tier 2 according to the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report (Year) of the US State Department.

In 2015 a total of 342 persons including 125 Border Guard Bangladesh, 25 Criminal Investigation Department and 25 Special Branch members and 167 police received training on child friendly interview skills. 42 police, BGB and Coast Guard received training of trainers. In 2013, 40 judges (6 Women) were oriented on the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012 and the draft Rules. A training manual for police personnel was developed and 82 police officials were trained at the Forensic Training Institute, Criminal Investigation Department and the Special Branch Training School. The salient features of the PSHT Act 2012, investigation of human trafficking as an organised crime including coverage of ex-country investigation were included in the training. Also 61 lawyers, public prosecutors and CSO staff were oriented on the PSHT Act. An Integrated Crime Data Management System has been established at the Police Headquarters where all information of trafficking victims/survivors are preserved.

Madam Chair

Bangladesh maintains reservation about Articles 2 and 16(1)C of CEDAW charter. We mentioned in our previous report that time was required for examination of these issues. In our society women can exercise their rights to divorce their spouses without any hindrance, although this has not been brought under the coverage of legal compulsion.

With regard to Reservation 2, we still understand that the issue requires an in-depth examination. We cannot disregard the country-specific, longstanding social values, customs and culture being in practice over ages. Women's property rights are determined in accordance with the religious practices of the parties concerned.

Unless the people in the society reach a level of acceptance, any decision imposed on them may severely infringe their religious sentiment. You will be in agreement with me that initiating a reform of this magnitude is an arduous task for the state, although no obstacle is insurmountable. We are exploring how to build consensus among general people and trying to share the experiences of the Muslim countries that have already withdrawn these reservations.

Madam Chair

Women account for the majority of our 160 million people. We are optimistic that by strengthening 160 million hands of our 80 million women, we can elevate ourselves to a middle-income level by 2021 and achieve the status of a developed nation by 2041. Our government is performing towards attaining that target.

At the end, I would like to conclude my speech quoting the Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, "Let us all together strive to build a world of equitable society which ensures due rights, dignity and honour for women".

Thank you very much for patience hearing

Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu
