

Empowering women

By HE SHEIKH HASINA

PRIME MINISTER OF BANGLADESH



SHEIKH HASINA is the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Following his assassination in 1975 she went into exile only returning in 1981. She was a leading figure in opposing military rule in Bangladesh, and after serving in opposition was elected to her first term as Prime Minister in 1996. Following more time in opposition and exile during the subsequent political upheavals and military and caretaker governments in Bangladesh, her Awami League party won an overwhelming majority in the December 2008 election. She has vowed to build a Digital Bangladesh by 2021.

The Commonwealth of Nations has evolved over time into a mature, respected organization adopting new initiatives based on its core values and principles, and shaping itself with the needs of an ever changing world. Our present globalized world with its manifold complexities requires the Commonwealth of today to come up with innovative ideas to face them, and also to tap new potentials for itself and for the wider society of the world. True to its traditions, the Commonwealth is already doing the same with required initiatives. A case in point is the Commonwealth Connects Program designed as vehicle for transfer of technology and knowledge.

The new and emerging challenges looming over our small world such as climate change, food security, terrorism, poverty, gender mainstreaming, women empowerment, literacy, among others, calls for the Commonwealth to take a leading role in pioneering innovative and pragmatic mechanisms to successfully tackle them. No doubt it is time for the members of the Commonwealth to be more dynamic in their approach by adopting projects on pan-Commonwealth basis within regions or by encompassing all, or by emulating the best practices among themselves as is expected in such a close family of nations.

An issue, which I feel is vital for adequate progress and development, and yet achievable within a reasonable time, is women's empowerment. It has been possible for Bangladesh to achieve commendable success in this area. Women's empowerment is a global challenge, and in the Commonwealth, it deserves a more fundamental role as it is at the crux of the organization's core value of human rights. In fact, the Commonwealth's success in upholding its lofty ideals and principles would largely depend on how innovatively it assimilates women as equal partners in governance and development activities.

I am truly delighted to see that the Commonwealth had very rightly dedicated the Commonwealth Day of this year to women as the "Agents of Change". In addition, on the 8th of March 2011, the world community observed the centenary of the International Women's Day. We celebrate the great strides that women have made ever since the first women's suffrage movements when women had raised their voice against exploitation, low wages and hostile working conditions,

a hundred years ago. The progress encourages us to aim for equal partnership of women and men in transforming the social and political landscape of the world.

The hindrances and obstacles to empowering women in developing countries are more challenging and varied due to different social structures and traditional practices. However, overcoming them all is possible with application of different prescriptions and time frames. Fortunately for Bangladesh, the Constitution, adopted after its independence by the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, set the premise for establishing a just and modern society where men and women would enjoy equal rights in all spheres of state and public life. Women's participation in our development process, therefore, became an integral element of our state policy. Our Constitution also puts us under an obligation to adopt special measures and affirmative actions for the advancement of women as they are still part of the less-privileged section of the society. Our government has also taken up gender equality and women empowerment as one of our priority objectives to be achieved.

During our government's first term in office from 1996 to 2001, as Prime Minister, I spearheaded for the first time in Bangladesh, the adoption of the National Women Development Policy of 1997, an overarching policy for promoting equal rights of women. We also included women empowerment in our National Plan of Action to implement the Beijing decisions. In 2009, soon after forming our present government, we revived and revised the 1997 Women Development Policy as the National Women Development Policy 2011, incorporating a number of new equality issues. The purpose is for women to have their due share in transforming Bangladesh into a middle income country by 2021, the golden jubilee of our independence, and we are aiming to fulfill our promise to the Bangladeshi people with our "Vision 2021" election manifesto.

Our efforts in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment includes the formulation of political, legal, and policy framework, ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its domestication, inclusion of gender issues in SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) as well as National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (NSAPR-11) 2009-2011. These initiatives address wide range

of issues to ensure participation of women in decision making processes in both the economic and political arenas. They also include protection of women against vulnerability and risk, elimination of all forms of violence against women, and building of women's capacity through education and dissemination of knowledge.

To achieve our goals, we have invested heavily in women's education. Special emphasis has been applied to ensuring gender parity at the primary level and to maintain it at higher levels. Stipends for girls, free education up to primary level under Primary Education Development Programs have resulted in increased enrollment of girls and decreasing rate of dropouts. Enrollment rate of girls in secondary school is also increasing at an impressive rate, especially due to the Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP), which provides cash incentives or stipend to secondary school girls. This program has been successful in increasing the number of female students entering secondary schools and also in keeping them there till their graduation. Our plan is now to make education free for girls up to the graduation level.

Bangladesh is also proud of the notable progress made in realizing MDG-4 and MDG-5, five years earlier than the stipulated 2015. Indeed, it was an occasion of immense fulfillment when during the 65th UNGA last September I was presented with the MDG Award for Bangladesh's achievement of the key target of MDG-4, that is, reducing child mortality by two-thirds. As for maternal mortality rate, Bangladesh's progress has accelerated laudably in recent years. Statistics show that Bangladesh's maternal mortality rate (MMR) has declined from 574 per 100,000 live births in 1992 to 194 today, a number lower than the MDG target. It has been possible because of enhanced access of every expecting mother to free maternal health and child delivery services in the 11,000 free community clinics, of the planned 18,000, established by our government across the country. Our aspiration, is to achieve zero maternal and infant mortality rates by the MDG target date of 2015.

Since empowerment of women is inextricably linked to poverty alleviation, our government has launched a program of distributing allowances to over a million widows and destitute women. Another 80,000 poor mothers are beneficiaries of maternity allowance program and a further 830,000 women living in extreme poverty are provided with food security under the Vulnerable Group Development Program. Moreover,

women are given extensive training to equip them with various income generating skills for their economic emancipation. All these initiatives have begun to yield results. Truly, economic empowerment aided by realistic policy directives has led our women to political empowerment.

At present in Bangladesh Parliament, 64 of 330 seats are occupied by women. Five of them are ministers holding important portfolios in a cabinet led by a woman Prime Minister, with the Leader of the Opposition who is also a woman. Also, the Deputy Leader of the Parliament, a Whip, two Chairpersons of two Parliamentary Standing Committees are women. Women also occupy senior positions in business and in chambers, in civil and diplomatic services, in judiciary and local government, in police and the military, and in every profession. Women navy officers are serving in a frigate in UN mission in Lebanon and comprise UN's first ever all women police unit in UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti. At home, three million women make a strong work force in the formal RMG sector, and one million in pharmaceutical and other export sectors. Another three million women have become small entrepreneurs through micro-credit at the grass roots level.

Today, with increasing women participation, Bangladesh's socio-economic indicators are improving, our democratic institutions are becoming stronger, our economy is vibrant despite external shocks, and our climate change challenges are being met with greater resilience, thereby fueling our optimism about the future. Women are indeed proving to be true agents of change assuring us all the more that our collective spirits will make us do wonders in the days to come. ■

Empowerment of women is inextricably linked to poverty alleviation

Prime Minister of Bangladesh HE Sheikh Hasina with Mrs Babli Sharma and the Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma

