

B A N G L A D E S H

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**LEADING IN WOMEN**  
**EMPOWERMENT**

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# Bangladesh Leading in Women Empowerment

# Introduction

Bangladesh has made unquestionable progress since its independence in 1971. The country now shows stronger performance than its neighbours India and Pakistan. The leaders of the country's major parties are women, including the Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader as well as the Speaker of the National Parliament. The Honorable Prime Minister (HPM) Sheikh Hasina has been internationally acknowledged as a remarkable role model in development of education, health sectors and women empowerment.

The government has initiated various programmes and projects for the development of women, and making it a crucial aspect of the government's overall vision. The Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-2015) of Bangladesh government, which is the national medium term development plan, committed to transforming Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021, considers women's engagement in political and economic activities as a cross-cutting issue and one of the main drivers of social transformation. The current government is committed to attaining gender equality and empowering women as well as implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Bangladesh has already substantially achieved the Millennium Development Goal 3 as it has secured gender parity in primary and secondary education at the national level. The government now continues to work relentlessly to ensure women's overall development through advocating equal and active participation in the mainstream socio-economic activities and removing the various impediments to their empowerment.

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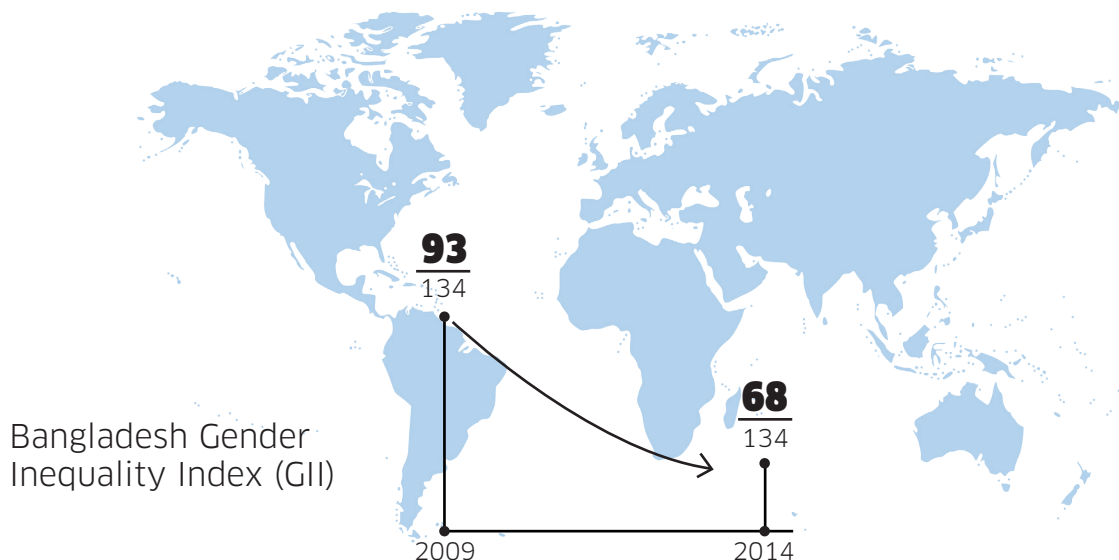
## 01 Initiatives for Equal Opportunity



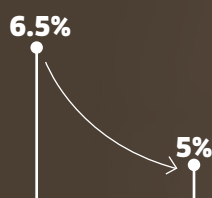
### 1.1 Reducing Gender Gap

According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index 2014, Bangladesh has made continued progress in tackling gender disparity in four key areas – economic participation, education, health and political empowerment. The country ranked 68th among 142 countries scoring 0.697 (with 0.0 being inequality and 1.0 being equality). Bangladesh is also featured as one of the top ten nations to have reduced gender inequality by

political empowerment of women. Bangladesh has been making steady progress year-on-year in reducing gender inequality. Bangladesh also outperformed its neighbours India and Pakistan in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), a composite index that measures the cost of gender inequality to human development. It ranks 111th on the GI compared to 123rd for Pakistan and 133rd for India.



## 1.2 Economic Measures



Rate of unemployed women decreased

**Gender responsive** budget initiated

Female migration increased in **239%** between 2011-2015

**11,000 female** entrepreneurs received more than **Tk 98.8 million** SME loans in 2016

**ICT division** actively involved in supporting **education and entrepreneurship** among rural women

Several initiatives have been taken to increase women participation in the economic activities and to improve the condition of women in every sphere of life. The World Bank estimates that labour force involvement rate of women in Bangladesh stands at 57.60%. Recently, the government has taken a \$30 million project titled 'Income Generating Activities' (IGA), to make rural women self-sufficient, under which they will receive a four-month duration training on various trades across the 426 sub-districts of the country.

To expedite women's economic empowerment, comprehensive initiatives have been undertaken by providing extensive training, creating job opportunities, ensuring participation in labour market and providing support to small and medium women entrepreneurs. All programmes related to women development and employment are being re-structured in order to enhance women participation in all economic activities to 50 percent by 2021.

The government has also established and operating the Joyeeta Foundation, which is working to commercially engage grass-root level women in the supply chain from production to distribution.

Necessary steps have been taken to set up permanent centres for skills development and hostels for women entrepreneurs and workers. To

Collateral Free Micro Credit For Rural Women At only **5% Service Charge**

**15% Refinance** Fund Reserved For Women Entrepreneurs

Women Entrepreneurs Receive **10% Industrial Plots**

Entitlement To Collateral Free SME Loan Up To **Tk 2.5 Million**

Women Entrepreneurs **Receive 10%** Of Small Enterprise Fund

encourage women entrepreneurship, a number of financial incentives have also been provided.

Between 2010 and 2013, banks and non-bank financial institutions has disbursed \$860 million to 57,722 women entrepreneurs from their own sources. In 2010, 13,831 women entrepreneurs received \$231 million; in 2011, 16,696 women entrepreneurs received \$257 million; and in 2012, 17,362 women entrepreneurs received \$282 million as SME credit. This indicates that disbursement towards women entrepreneurs has been increasing both in amount and numbers. Women entrepreneurs can also get advantage of re-financing from Bangladesh Bank fund. Women entrepreneurs are now entitled to get credit at concessional rate of 10% interest and 15% refinance fund is reserved for them specifically. Women are also entitled to Small and Medium

Enterprise (SME) loan over \$30,000 free of collateral, against personal guarantee. Moreover, all banks and financial institutions have set up service desks for women entrepreneurs. For the economic empowerment of rural women, collateral free micro-credit is given with 5% service charge. Women entrepreneurs receive 10% of the Small Enterprise Fund and 10% industrial plots.

Currently more than 3 million women are working in the RMG sector alone. Bangladesh enhanced its formal women labor force from 24% in 2010 to 36% in 2013. Women's participation in agricultural production is facilitated through access to agricultural technologies and loans given for agro-processing, homestead gardens, nurseries, bee-keeping and other activities. Marginal and landless farmers, of whom 50% are women, are being given support.



### 1.3 Increased Inclusion in Education



Bangladesh has gained immense success in girls' education during the past decade. Around US\$ 9.5 million worth stipends were distributed among 133,000 graduate or equivalent level female students, from the interest of the Education Trust Fund.

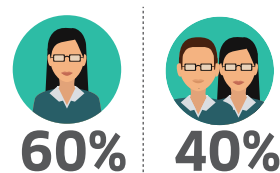
To empower women, the current government led by Sheikh Hasina has attached top priority to girls' education. Primary education is compulsory and free for all children aged between 6 to 10. All children attending primary and secondary schools receive textbooks free of cost. The education of girls up to grade XII in public institutions is also free.

To encourage female students to continue their studies and to reduce drop-out rates, stipends are awarded. This proactive strategy for girls' education resulted in almost 100% enrollment rate and gender parity. Net enrolment rate in primary education has increased from 60.5% in 1990-91 to 98.7%, with 99.4% for girl students. In primary schools, female enrolment is now 51% and in secondary schools it is now 53%, while male is 47%, a sharp departure from even just a few years ago when male was 65% and female was 35%. Gender parity has now been achieved in primary and secondary education at the national level. Bangladesh is also well on track to achieve gender parity in tertiary education too, which has increased from 0.37 in 1990-91 to 0.66 in 2016.

#### FEMALE AND MALE RATIO IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLING



#### POSITIONS RESERVED FOR FEMALE STAFF IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL



## 1.4 Improved Maternity Healthcare

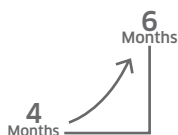


Fertility decline and increased uptake of maternal and reproductive services over the past two decades, especially antenatal and post-natal care, skilled birth attendance, and facility deliveries, have contributed to the reduction of neonatal deaths. Significant progress has also been made in reducing the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) from 569 in 1990 to 176 in 2015 with an average annual reduction of 4.7%. The ratio of skilled-birth attendants also increased from 12% in 2000 to 42% in 2014 and of these 37% are institutional deliveries. The current government plans to reduce MMR to 63 per 100,000 live births by 2030. Steps have been taken for delivery of primary healthcare services through community clinics to rural, marginal and vulnerable women.

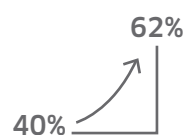
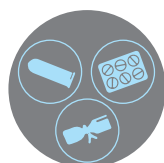
Under a five-year project undertaken by the government in 2015 addressing women in the grassroots, during each of two pregnancies, women would get Tk 200 for each of four check-ups. A family will receive Tk 500 a month for checking growth of their babies up to two years of age, and then Tk 1000 every three months until five years of age. Mothers will also get Tk 500 for attending workshops on child

nutrition and knowledge development. Officials say the project has been built on the “successes” of a pilot scheme for cutting maternal deaths further and addressing malnutrition.

Model women friendly district hospitals have been established. Maternal Health Voucher Schemes provides a voucher package of three ante-natal checkups, safe delivery under skilled birth attendants, one post-natal checkup and transport cost. 12,956 maternity centers across the country have been providing service and advice to disadvantaged women on education, healthcare, nutrition, maternal and child care, and interest free microcredit. Paid maternity leave has been extended from 4 months to 6 months. The Government has also extended the ‘Maternal Voucher Scheme’ and ‘Working Lactating Mother Helping Fund’ in the 53 sub-districts for expecting mothers. It is estimated that, because of Government’s expanded coverage of social safety net number of maternity beneficiaries increased from around \$6250 to \$7500, lactating mother’s beneficiaries from around \$2250 to \$2500 in 2017-18.



**The government has extended maternity leave for 6 months from 4 months.**

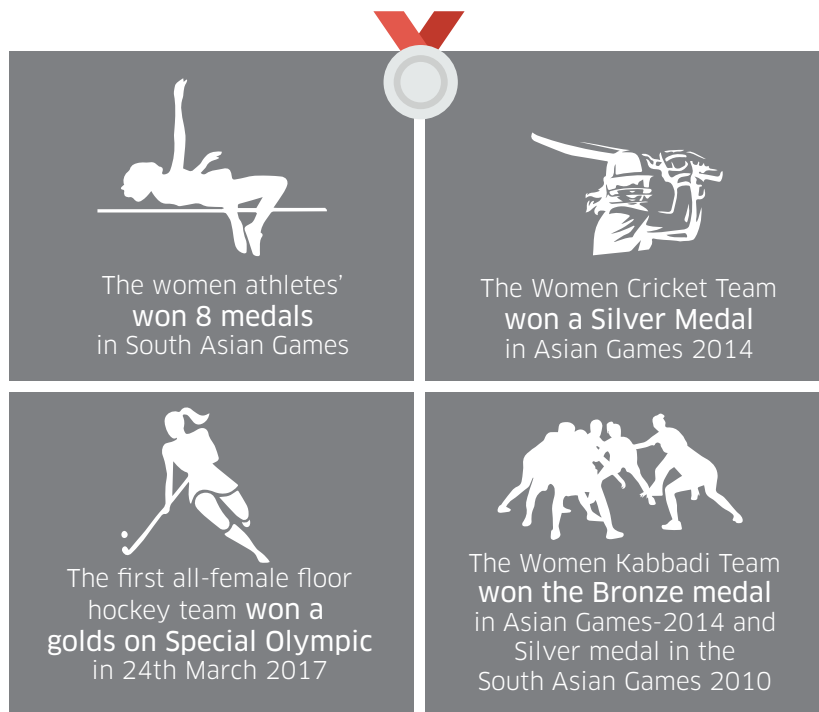


**Contraceptive prevalence rate increased to 62% from 40% 15 years ago**

## 1.5 | Increased Participation in Sports



The Ministry of Youth and Sports is ensuring broad participation of both male and female in sports with special focus on women's advancement and empowerment. Apart from battling the social barriers, the women's sporting sector also faces challenges of available funds and proper grooming. Government has established women sports complexes, where women athletes, footballers, cricketers, volleyball players, swimmers, gymnasts receive grooming facilities.



## 1.6 | Participation in Elected Bodies

Bangladesh currently stands eight in Asia for women's parliamentary representation with 20% members or 70 women members in the National Parliament being women. Bangladesh is the only country in South-Asia which has a woman prime minister, leader of the House, woman leader of the opposition, woman speaker and deputy leader of the house. Each sub-district has one elected female vice-chairman; with currently 12,500 elected female members who are working on local governance.

Proportion of seats held by women in Parliament increased from 12.70% in 1990 to 20% currently. In order to enhance women's empowerment, the number of seats reserved for women in the National Parliament have been increased by 5, and made 50. To create opportunities for women's increased participation in politics, reserved seats for women in union council, sub-district councils and municipalities have been increased to one third of the total and women are to be directly elected to those seats. The increasing number of women among the Justices of the Supreme Court,

top administration positions– secretaries, additional secretaries, joint secretaries, deputy commissioners, top positions of police, armed forces and UN peacekeepers, are all indicators of advancing women's empowerment. Many of these have been possible due to a reserve quota created by this government for women employment at every level of administration to enhance women participation in government jobs.

National  
Parliament seats  
reserved for  
women raised to  
30 and thereafter  
**50**  
by the current  
government

There are  
10% reserved  
quota in formal and  
15% reserved quota  
in non-formal  
government jobs



## 02 Special Measures for Women Empowerment



### 2.1 Measures to Prevent Violence Against Women

To elevate criminal investigations to the new age, the Government of Bangladesh has enacted a law titled **Deoxyribo Nucleic Acid (DNA) Act, 2014**. This law allows DNA profiling to identify the criminals accused of major offences like rape, murder, determining fatherhood, motherhood and sibling relationship and also identifying decomposed bodies.

In 2016, the Government of Bangladesh took the initiative to amend the **Dowry Prohibition Law** keeping provision for stricter punishment for provoking suicide. The Bangladesh Parliament passed the **Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010**, which was the first pronounced recognition of the problem of domestic violence in Bangladesh by the State. Again in 2013, the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Rule was passed for establishing equal rights of women and children as prescribed in the constitution of Bangladesh for ensuring protection of women and children from family violence. Recently, the **Child Marriage Control Act, 2013** (the latest amendment to this Act which provides for strict punishments for marriage of girls below the age of 18) has been finally approved by the Bangladesh Cabinet and formed Child Marriage Prevention Act, 2017.

To address the problem of human trafficking, particularly trafficking of women, the government

of Bangladesh has enacted the **Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act 2012**. The Act categorically defined various terms related to trafficking like forced labour, exploitation, consent, etc. Moreover, an '**Alliance to Combat Trafficking in Women and Children (ACTWC)**' was established in 2011 under the Department of Women Affairs to reduce women and children trafficking.

Section 509 of the Penal Code 1860 was included in the Mobile Court Schedule that empowers executive magistrates to try a person summarily for eve-teasing and sexual harassment. In February 2012, the Bangladesh Parliament passed the **Pornography Control Act 2011** with the provision of up to 10 years' rigorous imprisonment and Tk 500,000 (\$6250 approximately) in fine for its violation. The law provides for seven years' rigorous imprisonment and Tk200,000 (\$2500 approximately) in fine for producing any pornographic content without their knowledge. According to the law, if a person tries to blackmail anyone or damages anyone's social or individual reputation through pornography, the offender will be sentenced to maximum five years' rigorous imprisonment and fined.

In 2012, a **National Helpline Center for violence against children and women** has been established to provide support to any women and their families who are in need of prompt support by calling the 24-hour Helpline Number 10921.

## 2.2 | Measures for Social Inclusion

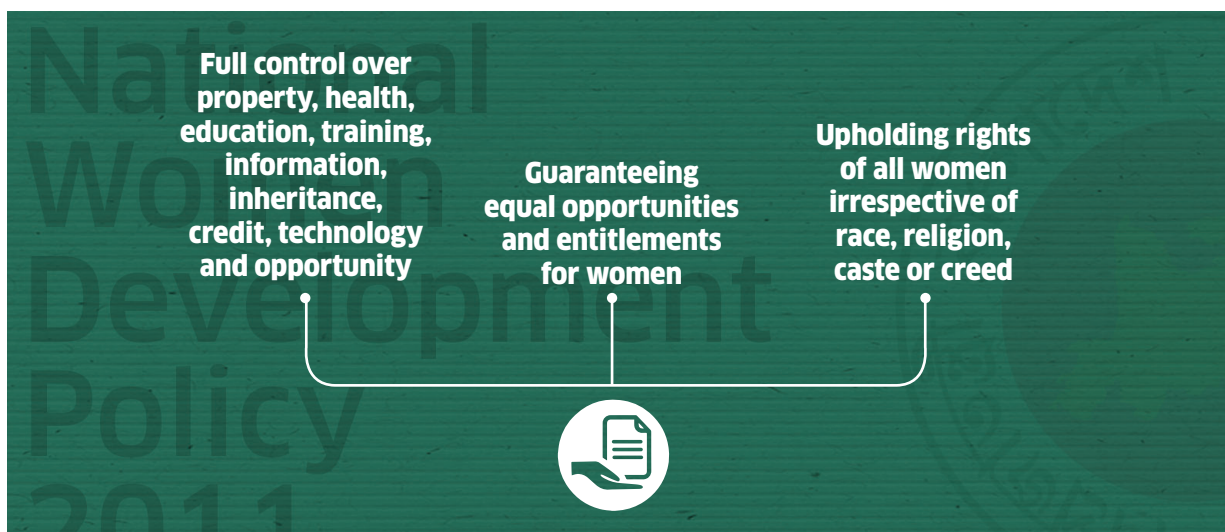
The government has taken several initiatives for those women who are in need of financial and other types of assistance under the 'Social Safety-Net Allowance' Schemes. Under the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program, a substantial program for the development of vulnerable community who lives below the poverty line, the government has assisted 750,000 women in the two-year circle of 2015-2017. Extensive social safety net programmes have been also undertaken to provide various kinds of allowances, such as destitute women allowance, maternity and lactating mother allowance, disabled women allowance, divorced women allowance etc. Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) is carried out for ensuring food security to vulnerable and extreme poor women. Enhanced participation and livelihood of rural poor women is a priority programme of the government implemented through the "One House, One Farm Project", which gives priority to female households in every village.

Living standard  
has been raised of  
**2.18 million**  
women through  
**'One Home One Farm  
Project'**  
and about  
**265,000 women**  
through  
"Comprehensive  
Village Development  
Program.



## 2.3 | National Women Development Policy 2011

One of the principal steps taken for women empowerment by the Awami League led government after coming to power in 2009 was the formulation of the National Women Development Policy 2011 which makes provisions for women to get equal share of property and avail opportunity and business. The policy upholds the rights of all women irrespective of their religious background. The Policy asks the State to provide women with full control over their right to land, earned property, health, education, training, information, inheritance, credit, technology and opportunity to earn and enact necessary new laws to put these rights into practice. In August 2013, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs formulated a national work plan for implementing the Women Development Policy 2011. The government has since, not budged from its commitment to ensure equality of all women in Bangladesh despite the 2011 Policy facing severe, often violent, resistance from religious extremist's groups.



## 2.4 | Gender Responsive Budget

In the 2009-10 fiscal year, the current government first initiated the concept of gender responsive budget. In the 2016-17 fiscal year, this has been extended to cover 41 ministries working to empower women and enhance their social dignity, improving women's productivity and enhancing their participation in the labour force and widening women's effective access to general public sector services and income generating activities.



## 03 International Awards and Recognition



Due to the astonishing progress made by Bangladesh in empowering women, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the country has been recognized globally, including by world leaders and international organizations.

### **Women in Parliament (WIP) Award**

In March 2015, Bangladesh won the Women in Parliament (WIP) Award for regional leadership in the South and Southeast Asia categories for closing gender gap in politics. In the 71st United Nations General assembly (UNGA) meeting HPM Sheikh Hasina indicated that the idea of 'Making every women and girl count' is her very own thought on women empowerment and gender equality issue.

### **'Tree of Peace' by UNESCO**

In 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was awarded with a special 'Tree of Peace' by UNESCO for being a strong advocate on world stage in girls and women education, a certain prerequisite for her contributions to girls' education as well as

political and economic empowerment. She was also recognized for jointly launching the Global Partnership for Girls and Women Education and leading the country to become a champion country of "Global Education First Initiative".

### **World Economic Forum lauds Bangladesh's gender successes**

World Economic Forum (WEF) has cited Bangladesh as one of the shining examples of successes in gender empowerment (Basu, K. WEF, March 2015). It has stated that economic empowerment of Bangladesh through such means as micro-loans has given them a voice that has played a role in boosting the quality of life not just of the women themselves but entire households, resulting in the sharp improvement in the

country's social indicators, such as female education, life expectancy, children's health and so on.

### **Bangladesh put on steering committee of US-led Equal Futures Partnership**

In February 2015, Bangladesh was nominated as a founding member of the Steering Committee of the US-led Equal Futures Partnership (EFP), a multilateral initiative that promotes gender equality. Bangladesh was also made Chair of the EFP Asia Pacific Regional Subcommittee. The EFP's main objective is to promote gender equality in political and economic spheres, and bring together countries that have shown leadership

### **WHO lists Bangladesh as most promising for improving maternal health**

Lancet, a leading medical journal of United Kingdom and World Health Organization (WHO) have listed Bangladesh as one of the 10 "fast-track" countries that have made significant

achievements in improving maternal and child health. Under-5 child mortality declined by 65% in Bangladesh between 1990 and 2011 while maternal mortality dropped drastically by 66% during the same timeframe.

### **"Planet 50-50 Champion"**

In September 2016, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was conferred with the "Planet 50-50 Champion" by UN-Women and "Agent of Change Award" by Global Partnership Forum for her outstanding contributions to women empowerment.

### **Improvement in Safe Mother Index 2014**

Bangladesh advanced by six spots to secure 130th position in a global survey titled "Safe Mother Index 2014" covering 178 countries, showing the country's status in saving and improving the lives of mothers and children. The index is part of the agency's annual State of the World's Mothers report, now in its 15th edition.



In a society, where there is scope for women's participation and empowerment, radical and violent extremism will have no place. We have to expand the realm of women's participation in workplace to build a sustainable future for everyone.

### **Sheikh Hasina**

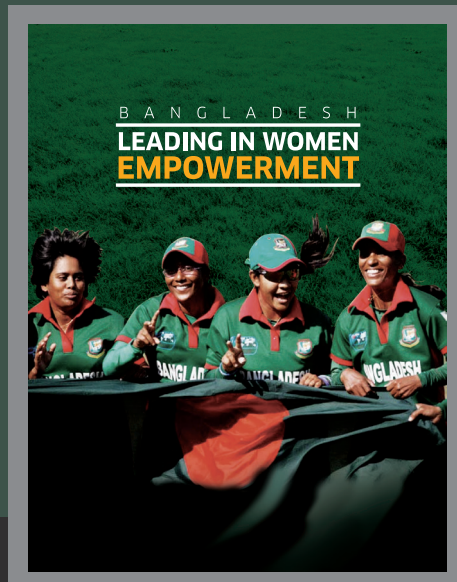
Honorable Prime Minister  
People's Republic of Bangladesh

## Conclusion

Despite all developments, cultural and social barriers continue to restrict a large percentage of the women in Bangladesh. Hence, government continues to initiate the participation of women and imposes strict laws and policies to be stringent regarding issues that disadvantage women across the nation. The government in cooperation with a wide range of partners continues to foster women's empowerment, gender equality and building resilience. The government now looks forward to further prioritizing women in the labour market in order to bring them into the mainstream workforce and take the country forward.

In 2016, the first year of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, the government supported women to claim their right to equal treatment under the law, to gain elected office, to draw on the power of innovation and technology, and to become leaders through sports. Among many other initiatives, the government supported civil society and women's rights activists to inform and influence crucial policy discussions. Gender equality is enshrined in the Bangladesh constitution and thus the government's objective is to ensure 50:50 participation of men and women as per the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.





## Bangladesh Leading in Women Empowerment

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H 2, R 11(New), 32(Old), Mirpur Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka- 1209

Email: [info@cri.org.bd](mailto:info@cri.org.bd)

[www.cri.org.bd](http://www.cri.org.bd)

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