

Address by the Hon'ble Dr. Dipu Moni, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, at the Welcoming Ceremony for an International Delegation Visiting the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh (December 2 - 5, 2009)

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I returned to Dhaka this morning after the meetings in Trinidad and Tobago of the Commonwealth Heads of State. Forgive me if I am still a little jet lagged. But I did not want to miss the opportunity to greet you all who have also traveled from far distances to be in Bangladesh to celebrate and nurture and support the work of the Asian University for Women. I have not had the opportunity yet to visit this young university but I can tell you that it has already earned a special place in my heart and mind and I will visit it to see first hand what you will see tomorrow when you go to Chittagong. I can, however, in the eye of my mind already imagine what kind of place it must be: A University that recognizes no ethnic, religious, or cultural barriers; a university where a Vietnamese student lives and studies, side by side with a Cambodian and Afghan or a Bangladeshi or Pakistani. A University that says that you may be the first in your family ever to get to a place of higher learning but nothing can stop you from being the best. A university where the age-old entrapment of prejudice against class, national origin or other contingencies of birth are overcome by the enlightenment of a liberating education and the promise of a future where the best possibilities in each of us are nurtured and realized. As the first female Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, I take particular pride that this country of ours that has benefited so much from the goodwill of people around the world can now host an institution that educates not only our own women but those from so many other friendly countries. I am told the Asian University for Women already has students from 13 countries and next year there will be several more countries added, including Iraq, Iran and Indonesia. In my mind there can be no greater force for change than a band of women educated and empowered who carry a vision of their own and have the courage to defy and overcome whatever resistance that may be in their way. In the annals of the history of Bangladesh, there are indeed many inspiring such role models. In the fight against the British for our own independence, it was a young woman named Preeti Lota from Chittagong who dared to go into Chittagong Club to resist the British rule. Ironically, even in her bid to resist which cost her own life, she had dressed as a man, sadly capturing the truth that even in our sacrifices we are often inhibited from acting in our own name and persona. Fortunately, we have made tremendous progress since those days. You are in a country, I am happy to say, where the government is led by a woman as is the Opposition. There are five other women in the Cabinet, holding portfolios such as agriculture, home affairs, and my own in foreign affairs. We have nearly 100 percent enrollment of girls in primary schools and the enrollment of girls in secondary schools is also fast rising. It is estimated that nearly three million women work in garments and textile factories alone – paving the way for a radical redefinition of women's role in the economy. Our microfinance programmes that engage nearly 15 million women have attracted world attention. So, it is perfectly fitting that you have chosen to locate the Asian University for Women in this land.

I am aware that the Asian University for Women is currently operating out of the rented facilities and the urgency to move its programmes on a permanent campus. I have seen the images of the new campus model and the that of the first buildings. They are inspiring and I am inspired. I am also aware that the start of construction has been delayed due to some pending issues relating to land that need to be resolved with the Government. I can assure you on behalf of the Hon'ble Prime Minister who serves as the Chief Patron of the University and under whose previous tenure the concept of the university was first accepted in Bangladesh, we will do everything within our means to make Bangladesh the most hospitable place for this institution and its students and faculty and staff. The land issues will be resolved and whatever support the university requires from the Government will be forthcoming from every quarter. The Asian University for Women is a beacon of hope that brightens the prospect s of all of us. We will do our share to keep the flame alight and make it brighter.

I want to thank you on behalf of the Hon'ble Prime Minister and on my own behalf for coming to Bangladesh and devoting yourselves to a most august endeavour. I hope your next few days in Bangladesh will be inspiring and fun. You have our warm invitation to return anytime.

Joy Bongobandhu.
Joy Bangla

Thank you.