

# MESSAGE

## CONVOCATION SPEAKER



**Dr. Sufia Ahmed**

National Professor  
Former Director, Bangladesh Bank

### Message

I would like to congratulate the Founders, Vice-Chancellor, Chairman and the Board of Trustees, Faculty and Staff of East West University, the graduating students and their parents, on this auspicious occasion of its 12th Convocation.

Since it was founded in 1996, East West University has made significant contributions in the realm of higher education providing a leadership which other institutions of our country would do well to emulate.

While felicitating the new graduates, I would like to point out that as each of you start your career in whatever field it may be, it is my hope that the expertise and skills you have acquired from your university will help you achieve not only your personal goals but the increase of knowledge and the improvement of our country.

I wish the Convocation every success.

*Sufia Ahmed*

**(Dr. Sufia Ahmed)**

National Professor

# ADDRESS

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Honourable Minister of Education, Mr Nurul Islam Nahid MP, nominated by HE the President Mr Md. Zillur Rahman, Chancellor of East West University, the Chairman and Members of the Bangladesh University Grants Commission, respected Vice Chancellor, the Chairman and Members of the Board of Trustees of the University, learned Teachers, Officers, distinguished guests and beloved students.

I deem it a great honour and privilege to have been invited by the authorities of the East West University to speak before this distinguished gathering as the Convocation Speaker.

East West University is a private university which started functioning in the year 1996 with 20 students and 6 faculty members. By 2011, the number of students has reached approximately 7084 and over 324 faculty members. In the beginning the proportion of female students was about 15 percent and at present the number has reached about 30 percent. East West University has been consciously endeavouring to increase the proportion of female students who benefit from the scholarship programme, as 60 percent of the scholarships are awarded to women students. This university has demonstrated a love of learning and commitment to the mission of bringing Eastern culture and values together with Western thought and innovation.

The month of February reverberates with the spirit of Ekushey. The fateful day of 21st February 1952 sowed the seeds of Bengali nationalism in Pakistan. On this memorable day, Bengali language was anointed with martyrs' blood. I pay my homage to those heroes who sacrificed their lives to enthrone our mother tongue as one of the State Languages of Pakistan. I take this opportunity to pay my tribute to the President Mr Md. Zillur Rahman, the Chancellor of this University for having played a vital role as one of the organisers and active participants of the Language Movement. Since the Language Movement of 1952 the women of this region became more independent and confident of their abilities and aware of their rights against discrimination, oppression and injustice imposed upon them by a conservative society. The participation of women in the Language Movement of 1952, the Mass Uprising of 1969 and the Liberation Movement of 1971 were important milestones which helped to liberate them from their downtrodden position in society.

Recently, the alarming situation caused by increasing violence against women in different forms is causing concern to the country as a whole. In this context I have chosen to speak about "A glimpse into the situation of women in Bangladesh" as the theme of my address to the Commencement audience at the East West University. I hope I shall not be misunderstood for being gender biased, because this issue does not only concern women but also their male counterparts and the society as a whole.

In Bangladesh women who constitute about half the population of this country have rights both under law and under the Constitution. The Constitution of Bangladesh professes equality of women with men, and the Civil and Criminal Procedure and the Penal Code all have specific provisions for women. But the reality of women's lives in Bangladesh appears to be a mixture of secular law, religious law and accepted social norms of the region. The main stumbling block for women in Bangladesh is the adaptation of customary law to modern society.

Here, I shall deal with Muslim women since Muslims do form about 90 per cent of the total population in Bangladesh. The life of a Muslim is administered by Muslim Sharia or by personal laws as they govern important matters like succession, inheritance, marriage, divorce, maintenance and guardianship of children.

In Bangladesh women from every strata of society are under the domination of men. The role a woman plays here during her lifetime is that of a "docile daughter, a compliant wife and dependent mother," To adjust with this ideal image she is assigned a position of inferiority, dependence, subjugation and seclusion in relation to men. The standard of ideal womanhood sets some essential qualities for a woman. She is expected to possess the qualities of obedience, patience, endurance and sacrifice.

During the recent years there has been some "peripheral changes" affecting a small section of women living in urban areas. But as Mahmuda Islam a reputed Professor of Sociology asserts that "the basic norms remain unaltered because of the fact that values and normative standards do not change at the same rate as changes in other material aspects of society ... .." In Bangladesh there is a gap between the rights and status accorded to women by laws and the Constitution and those imposed on her by social norms and tradition. What is given to women in theory is rarely within her reach in practice.

Legal and social equality under the Family Law is now of deepest concern to women of this country. Specifically speaking, this means protection against the injustice of polygamy and unilateral divorce, a concern of more vital importance to women than political equality, since legal and social inequality is a threat to all other rights. This threat affects all classes of women, educated and uneducated alike, endangers the security of the home and curtails all of women's potential contributions to national life.

The different governments of Bangladesh had been motivated and were spurred into actions by the global awareness on women's issues activated by the United Nations Decade for Women's Programmes from the year 1975 onwards. After decades of ignoring women's needs, government and international aid organizations have finally begun to recognize women as a key factor for economic advancement in the developing world.

To assess the enactment of International Laws on women and the Family, one could mention the International Women's Year, the World Conference held at Nairobi, and the United Nations Decade for Women: (Equality, Development and Peace) which contributed greatly to the process of eliminating obstacles to the improvement of the status of women at the national, regional and international levels. The United Nations sponsored Women's Conference held in 1985 made several recommendations to reach the desired goal. It had proposed forward looking strategies for the advancement of women for the period 1986 to the year 2000. The Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on civil and political rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Declaration on the Participation of Women in promoting International Peace and Co-operation and many such laws, have provided a renewed commitment by the international community to the advancement of women's cause and the elimination of gender biased discrimination.

Like most countries Bangladesh has ratified most of the conventions of the above mentioned international bodies. As a result, successive governments of Bangladesh have formulated new laws and amended existing flawed laws with a view to improve the status of women. The international initiatives have expedited the process of integrating women in development in line with the New International Economic Order. Fortunately during the past few decades we have witnessed slow but positive changes relating to the situation of women in Bangladesh. Women are now playing a role of increasing significance in social, economic, political and cultural life. The contribution of the female garment workers in the industrial sector is a positive factor towards women's economic emancipation in the country.

It must be remembered that the United Nations perception of women's rights does not conform to the reality of the situation in Bangladesh. It is to be noted that Bangladesh has ratified the United Nations Convocation on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on 6th November 1984 agreeing to Optional Protocol in the year 2000. However, the Bangladesh Government's reservations on Articles 2 and 16 undermines women's status in the family.

Article 2 (relating to “obligations to eliminate discrimination”) which call for reforming existing laws to remove all forms of discrimination between men and women, and to enact new laws/measures to ensure equality of sexes should be strictly followed in Bangladesh. Particular stress should be laid on Article 16 which asks to ensure equal family benefits and (“Equity in Marriage and Family Laws”). Most of the clauses of 16 pertaining to marriage, family relations and particularly, those which ensure equality of men and women in marriage, divorce and child custody should be fully operative in our country.

Our approach should be more progressive and radical and should actually concentrate on the above mentioned two articles of CEDAW to improve the status of women. As suggested in the Shadow Report to the Fifth Periodic Report of the Government of Bangladesh submitted by “AIN O SALISH KENDRA, BANGLADESH MAHILA PARISHAD, STEPS TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT TO THE UN COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN” in May 2004:

“The government of Bangladesh should take concrete steps to withdraw remaining reservations to Articles 2 and 16. This would be in keeping with constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination and the National Policy for Women’s Advancement (NPWA) and proposed Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP)”. The report also said that the Government should carry out an extensive review of existing domestic legislations to ensure that laws in Bangladesh are consistent with CEDAW.

I have attempted briefly to depict a realistic picture of the prevailing situation of women in Bangladesh after efforts have been made through legislation both at the national and international levels. But then only legislation does not provide the full answer to these problems. The time has now come for the educated men and women of this country, who constitute an exclusive, privileged, enlightened minority to play a major role. It is they who through their quest for knowledge and pursuit of the truth should come forward to analyse and clarify the exact situation relating to the problems that beset the women of Bangladesh today. It should be the prime concern of this enlightened minority to see how best the vast majority of our women adjust with the changing laws of the country and move forward along with the rest of the world without losing touch with spiritual values. Along with the government and of course by enlisting the full support of the menfolk, different women’s organizations, NGOs, professionals, intellectuals, bureaucrats, and individuals should work unitedly for the socio-economic development of women. The combined efforts of all may help to achieve the desired goal. I feel the pace of development in this area may be accelerated by the following steps:

- Negative and unfavourable social attitudes must be changed to allow women to play positive and more productive roles in decision making in the

family. Basic changes in attitudes towards the importance and value of girls and status of women within the family and community must be achieved throughout the society.

- A body should be set up by the government to monitor and coordinate the women targeted welfare works of various ministries and departments of the government for example, health, education, family planning etc. for overall welfare of the family.
- Programmes and projects need to be implemented to bring women into mainstream of politics and economic activities and they should originate at the grass root levels, and should enlist the latter's initiative, approval and support.
- Education should receive top priority and girls should have easy access to schools and its educational programmes. For this the number of schools earmarked for girls should be increased. The government and NGOs should work in collaboration towards this end. Opportunities must be expanded for the advanced education of girls. Measures should be taken for drop-outs to return to schools, gender issues should be integrated into instructional materials used in both formal and non-formal education.
- Marriage for girls at a tender age and dowry system should be strictly prohibited.
- Introduction of labour saving technology in household works should be introduced in order to make women play a more productive role in the family. At the same time men should be motivated to share domestic workload equally with women.
- To reduce the burden of the working mothers more and properly equipped day-care centres should be established.
- Legal support for women in the family must be ensured by enactment and implementation of uniform family Code and through the ratification of the convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women. Discriminatory laws relating to marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, adultery etc. should be repealed or at least replaced.
- Misinterpretation and wrong application of religious laws and traditions should be dealt with by the proper authority.
- The government, the NGO's and the women's groups should be in consultative process in formulating national policies relating to family matters to prevent disadvantages to women. The women of Bangladesh in general should assert their rights and particularly, the educated women of this country can play a vital role in this respect.

Before concluding I need to emphasise that the empowerment of women in its real sense is the key to enhancing the status of women in the society. I shall

end here by quoting National Professor Dr. A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed an internationally famous historian who has reflected my observations on the situation of women in Bangladesh succinctly:

“Women's rights must be viewed as an integral part of human rights. Only a truly democratic government can effectively implement human rights. A democratic government, however, is the product of a democratic society. But a society where illiteracy and poverty exist on a large scale, where feudal and authoritarian [and patriarchal] ideas prevail and blind faith and superstition flourish, cannot create a true democratic polity with regard to the rights of women. It has to be noted that no legislation by itself can ensure the rights unless women themselves become conscious of their own dignity and responsibilities”.

#### **Graduates,**

This is a very special and memorable day in your life. It marks the successful termination of your student career and you are on the threshold of the unfamiliar world which you will soon enter. On the one hand it is a day of great joy for you and your parents and I offer you my hearty congratulations. On the other hand it is a day to pause and think as you are this day leaving your Alma Mater to join the struggle for life. You will of course follow different avenues in life according to your equipment and taste. But there is one thing that applies to you all and that is, that the best is he who is best in action. The real excellence of a work lies in the doing of it but nothing is well done without true devotion and perseverance. To excel in the doing of anything one must apply oneself wholly to it. It is the perfect doing that excites love and admiration and gives pleasure to the doer. Without perfection a style cannot be acquired and a person without style makes no impression. You should also be aware of the fact that, there is wide-spread corruption in society today. Forces of evil have become predominant. These forces must be crushed but to do that the forces of good must muster strong. You have received an education which millions in your country have not had. You are now among the elite group on whom depends the future of this country. You owe it to your Alma Mater and to your country to ally yourselves with the forces of good to crush the forces of evil.