

Excellency, Ambassador of Netherlands to Bangladesh Mr. Anne Van Leeuwen; Van, distinguished participants.

Good afternoon, I am very pleased to join you at the **Workshop on Women’s Economic Empowerment and Gender Responsive Policies in Bangladesh**.

As Bangladesh celebrates 50 years of independence, we must celebrate the progress made on women’s empowerment and gender equality. The Government of Bangladesh has recognized women’s economic empowerment as a critical driver to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In September 2021, at the High-level Meeting of Women Leaders Convened by the President of the General Assembly at the United Nations Headquarters, the Honorable Prime Minister of Bangladesh pledged to achieve gender parity in the labor force by 2041<sup>1</sup>.

According to the 2022 World Economic Forum Report, Bangladesh continues to top the gender gap index in South Asia. While the country has achieved a high ranking on women’s political empowerment, it has scored low on gender parity in economic participation and opportunities<sup>2</sup>. We know, there has been a reduction in both men and women’s workforce participation due to the COVID 19 pandemic, however the proportional impact has been higher for women.

The Women’s Empowerment for Inclusive Growth (WING), programme implemented by UNDP, UN Women and UNCDF, with generous support from the Government of the Netherlands has aimed to complement multi-stakeholder level efforts to create an enabling environment for improving women’s economic participation in Bangladesh.

WING acknowledges that cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) are key drivers for Bangladesh’s economic growth. They absorb around 86% of the country’s labor

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<sup>1</sup> [Statement by Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Hon’ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Bangladesh tops South Asia ranking on gender gap index](#)

force and contribute to around 25% of the GDP. COVID has changed the way businesses and customers are operating. In 2020, the Bangladesh E-Commerce Association documented 70-80% increase in online sales as compared to pre-COVID times<sup>3</sup>.

Today, I would like to highlight three points also raised in the earlier sessions:

1. **First, the SME policy needs to be expanded to be more inclusive and cater to the needs of cottage and micro enterprises as well as online businesses.**

2. **Second, we must ensure that access to finance is inclusive and accessible to all.** According to the Bangladesh Bank data for 2021, only 4.08%<sup>4</sup> of the CMSME loan portfolio was disbursed to women entrepreneurs against the 10% target. **Strengthening dedicated desks for women entrepreneurs as well as localized monitoring of targets is needed.**

The WING programme’s Anondomela e-commerce platform, in collaboration with the A2i programme of UNDP and the Government of Bangladesh, has partnered with a non-bank financial institute to enable access to finance for its online entrepreneurs, which are traditionally not covered by formal credit schemes.

3. **Third, the role gender responsive budgeting (GRB) as a tool for enabling sustainable financing for gender equality is critical.** At the Upazila Parishads, 3% of the annual budget is required to be allocated for women’s development. WING’s baseline survey of 8 Upazilas in 2021, found that some Upazila Parishads were only allocating 1%<sup>5</sup> of their annual budgets for women’s development. **Effective GRB is crucial at both the national and local level and should be complemented by participatory budgetary processes and strengthened monitoring mechanisms. An enabling space for women leaders as well as civil society to participate and influence budgetary dialogues and outcomes is needed.**

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<sup>3</sup> [Mercantile Bank Ltd Monthly Online Bulletin](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Sharp rise in CMSME loans on growing economic activities \(tbsnews.net\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Thakurgaon Sadar Upazila Parishad. Source: Baseline and Local Economic Assessment Survey of WING, 2021 by Disaster Management Watch (DM Watch) on behalf of UN Women.

Speech by Gitanjali Singh for “Workshop on Women’s Economic Empowerment and Gender Responsive Policies in Bangladesh”, 22 August 2022, 12:40 pm – 12:45 pm, Renaissance Hotel, Gulshan Avenue, Dhaka

The UN Secretary General, António Guterres has highlighted and I quote, *“There is overwhelming evidence that investing in women is the most effective way to lift communities, companies and countries. Women’s participation makes peace agreements stronger, societies more resilient and economies more vigorous. And that is why the empowerment of women and girls is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.”*<sup>6</sup> end quote

Ladies and gentleman, women’s economic empowerment is a powerful tool to fast track achievement of the collective 2030 agenda. Investing in women is the both the right and smart thing to do.

Thank you.

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<sup>6</sup> [Remarks on International Women's Day 2018 | United Nations Secretary-General](#)