

Statement by Mr. E. Ahamed, Minister of State of External Affairs General Debate –
Agenda Item 28 “Advancement of Women” in the Third Committee, 68th United Nations
General Assembly on October 11, 2013

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, please allow me to thank the Secretary General for all his reports under this agenda item.

Empowering women politically, economically, educationally and socially has been a major objective of the Government of India to contribute to our national pursuit of inclusive development.

Our Government’s efforts are directed not only at adopting appropriate legislative and policy framework for advancement of women but also at raising social awareness of the issue of gender equality and women empowerment to fight deep-rooted social prejudices and stereotypes.



Mr. Chairman,

We are proud of the fact that India gave women equal voting rights more than 60 years ago at the time of our independence.

In 1992, India provided for 33% reservation to women in rural and local government bodies launching the mass political mobilization of women unprecedented globally given its scale.

The Parliament raised the percentage of women to 50% in local bodies in 2009. Today, close to 1.5 million elected women representatives are working in these bodies contributing to tangible progress in bridging the gender-divide in decision making and at the social level.

Mr. Chairman,

India's five-year development plans have recognized the importance of women both as contributors and agents of change. Gender is a cross cutting theme in all our development plans.

Since 2005, the Gender Budget Statement has been introduced in the annual Union Budget to reflect budgetary allocations for programmes that benefit women.

There is also a Joint Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women to ensure that legislations passed by Parliament are gender sensitive.

Mr. Chairman,

Education is perhaps the single most important instrument for social and economic transformation. The 2011 census indicates a positive increase of 11.8 % in literacy rate amongst women.

This is a consequence of constant efforts of the Government in ensuring access to education by adopting innovative schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (or Education for all), Mid-Day Meals and the National Literacy Mission.

The enactment of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2009 provided a momentum to our efforts to address issues of equity and elimination of barriers in accessing education.

With nearly universal enrollment for primary education, our current focus is on the expansion of secondary education and its accessibility to girls, and skill development for improved employability.

Health is another vital component in empowering women. The National Rural Health Mission launched in 2005 provides healthcare to all villages, with particular focus on maternal and children's health programmes.

Under this programme, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), who are trained health volunteers, provide a link between health centres and villages to ensure easy access to universal immunization, care of the new born, improved nutrition levels and healthcare for women.

These health interventions have led to increased life expectancy, increased rates of immunization of children, and substantial decline in infant and maternal mortality rates.

Mr. Chairman,

There are several schemes in place for socio-economic empowerment of women. The Government has proposed to set up India's first all-Women's Bank to assist women entrepreneurs and has allocated US\$ 200 million as initial capital.

To help rural women leverage their strength, increase bargaining power and enhance capacities and skills through joint action, the Government has encouraged the Self-Help Groups (SHG) – a movement that started as people's initiative. There are around 6 million SHGs of which 80% (4.8 million) are women's groups, covering almost 100 million beneficiaries.

The Government measures for SHGs, rural women and women entrepreneurs include easy access to credit, provision of loans at lower interest rates and support to enhancing women's rights to land ownership and providing infrastructure support for women farmers.

At least 50% of the work is reserved for women in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which responds to the needs of 53 million poor rural households by ensuring them 100 days employment per year. The scheme mandates equal pay for men and women.

Mr. Chairman,

To ensure real empowerment of women, it is equally important to firmly address the problem of exploitation and violence against women.

Violence against women and girls must be unequivocally condemned and tackled. We need to ensure that the stigmatization of victims, the trivialization of the crime and impunity of perpetrators are all stopped.

The Government has taken a number of steps to strengthen and expand the legislative framework in this area. It has set up fast track courts to try cases pertaining to violence against women.

The amendments to the criminal law, which were carried out earlier this year, significantly broaden the definition of sexual assault and harassment, and aims for greater accountability of public officials.

The 'Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act was adopted in February 2013 covering women employed in both public and private sectors. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act came into force in November, 2012.

Mr. Chairman,

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 addresses the issue of both marital and familial abuse. It recognises that violence can take various forms, including physical, economic, social and psychological.

There is also a comprehensive legislative and policy framework to address the problem of trafficking of women and girls. The 2010 UN Global Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons provides a holistic and comprehensive framework to intensify international efforts to tackle this menace.

The Government is introducing “One Stop Crisis Centre for Women” in 100 identified critical districts during the course of this year with the aim to provide integrated services required by women subjected to violence.

Mr Chairman,

Gender equality and the empowerment of women remains the key focus area of social development and distributive justice globally. India is fully committed to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and its Platform of Action.

Let me reaffirm our full commitment to advancing the goal of gender equality and empowerment of women globally and to eliminating the scourge of violence against women and girls. We firmly support the efforts of the United Nations, in particular UN Women in this regard.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

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