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Ambassador notes number of Bangladeshi women in senior political roles

## Female workforce crucial for economic prosperity

BY [MINORU MATSUTANI](#)  
STAFF WRITER

**Name:** Rabab Fatima

**Title:** Ambassador of Bangladesh(since April 2016)

**URL:** [bdembjp.mofa.gov.bd](http://bdembjp.mofa.gov.bd)

**DOB:** July 20, 1964

**Hometown:** Dhaka

**Years in Japan:** 2



Bangladesh Ambassador to Japan Rabab Fatima is one of 21 female ambassadors who were invited by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for a luncheon, during which they discussed female empowerment in their countries, on Jan. 9.

“We had a very interesting conversation,” Fatima, clad in a traditional dress, said in an interview with The Japan Times at her embassy following the lunch at the Prime Minister’s Official Residence. “I talked about female political empowerment in Bangladesh. Political parties are required to nominate a certain number of women (in elections), she said.

Thanks to such efforts, there are 72 female parliamentarians in 350-seat parliament, she said. Female politicians in Bangladesh include the prime minister, the speaker of the parliament, the leader of the opposition party.

“It’s not a matter of choice; it’s inevitable,” Fatima said of female empowerment in Bangladesh. “Our country can’t afford to leave 50 percent of the population out of the workforce.”

She stressed the political female empowerment of Bangladesh by pointing to the Global Gender Gap Report 2017, compiled by World Economic Forum, in which her country was ranked 47th in overall female empowerment and seventh in political female empowerment, while the U.S. was ranked 96th, Russia 121st and Japan 123rd.

In an effort to encourage girls to go to school, the government not only made schooling free for girls, but also provides households with subsidies to send girls school from the elementary level to high school.

“Making school free is not enough, as girls would rather work than go to school,” Fatima said.

Thanks to the policy initiative, female literacy rate has exceeded male’s in the 15-24 age bracket, with the former at 93.54 percent and the latter at 92.24 percent in 2016, according to the UNESCO website.

A holder of bachelor’s degree in social science from the University of Canberra and a master’s in international diplomacy from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Fatima has had a successful career as a diplomat. She also has had a busy life as a wife and mother, as well. Her husband is also a career diplomat and currently the Bangladesh ambassador to France, while their daughter is a graduate student in Australia.

She and her husband had been assigned to the same missions until 2005, when their daughter was “11 or 12,” she added. The last time she had a full family get-together was in December 2016 for her daughter’s graduation from college.

Nonetheless, becoming the ambassador to Japan is very rewarding for Fatima, calling the assignment “one of her greatest achievements.”

“I was deeply honored to be assigned to Japan because this country is one of the most important diplomatic, trusted and developing partners,” she said.

The first time she came to Japan was January 2005, when she was a delegate from Bangladesh for World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe. She was then a counselor, with the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the U.N. in Geneva. The second time was in 2016 when she came as the ambassador.

But the first encounter with Japan was her childhood with digital watches, TVs, cars and other products made in Japan. “Back then, 90 percent of cars in Bangladesh were Japanese,” she said.

Having been in Japan roughly two years, she said the experience has been, “Fascinating.”

“It has been a great learning experience. Japan has a unique culture, which you don’t see in any other country. The quality of life, ethics and values are really high,” she said.

“These are things I really appreciate because, now when I travel to other countries, I start comparing them with Tokyo,” she said. “In particular, the sense of security we have here is spoiling us.”

She would like young Bangladeshis to learn such Japanese values and is trying to increase academic exchanges between Bangladesh and Japan.

There were 1,600 Bangladesh students in Japan two years ago, and the figure is currently over 2,600, she said. “I want to see Bangladesh students learn agriculture and disaster control from Japan.”

Business exchanges are also active. A total of 253 Japanese companies are based in Bangladesh, she said. An exclusive economic zone for Japan is currently under

development in Bangladesh and it is expected to further facilitate trade and investment by Japanese companies in Bangladesh.

“My goal is to take Bangladesh-Japan relations to the next level of engagement at every level and sector. I would like more Japanese people to know about Bangladesh. For us in Bangladesh, Japan is a household name, and Japan is considered a close and trusted friend,” she said. “We deeply appreciate and respect your culture, values and technological advancement.”

She values personal exchanges, as well as business exchanges, referring to a Japanese photographer who said she “has 100 daughters in Bangladesh” as she adopted them.

“That’s something very touching. I want to see many people like that,” she said.

There is seemingly no end to Fatima’s diligence. As she said that she is “very driven by her career,” she wishes to continue to serve her country, with her belief that she represents female empowerment, she said.

Asked for her personal motto, she said, “If you love your job, you never have to work a day at it.”

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## **Diplomatic expertise in humanitarian issues**

Rabab Fatima assumed the post of Bangladesh ambassador to Japan in April 2016. Prior to taking up the post, she served as the director general (East Asia and the Pacific) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka. Fatima is a career diplomat and joined the Bangladesh Foreign Service in 1989. She has served in various Bangladesh missions, including the Permanent Mission to the U.N. in New York (1994-1998); the Deputy High Commission in Kolkata, India (1998-2000); the Permanent Mission to the U.N. in Geneva (2002-2005); and the Bangladesh embassy in Beijing (2005). She served in various capacities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs primarily with the U.N. She has extensive experience and specialization in human rights and humanitarian issues. Fatima has represented Bangladesh in various international and regional meetings, including the U.N. General Assembly, U.N. Security Council, U.N. Commission on Human Rights and various human rights bodies. Fatima has also served with the Commonwealth Secretariat, London, and the International Organization for Migration.

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*The Big Questions is a Monday interview series showcasing prominent figures who have a strong connection to Japan.*

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