

**Draft inaugural speech of Mrs. D. Purandeswari, MoS-HRD at the National Seminar on “Stop Child Abuse” to be held at Hyderabad on September 3, 2006 organized by Centre for Inquiry, India.**

Mr Chairman Sir and other distinguished national and international guests and friends.

I am grateful to you to have been invited here this morning to inaugurate the National Seminar on “Stop Child Abuse”. I understand that a seminar of this type is being organized in India for the first time and that it will be attended, among others by eminent national and international personalities. I welcome you all and wish you a successful participation in to-day’s seminar.

Child abuse and neglect, sometimes also referred to as child maltreatment, is defined in the [World Report on Violence and Health](#) as:

All forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power (WHO, 1999; forthcoming [2002]).

Within this broad definition there are various ramifications of the problems which can be identified as physical abuse; sexual abuse; emotional abuse and exploitation including child labour and gender discrimination.

Over the years, the abuse of children has received a lot of attention worldwide. The United Nations, through its member organizations such as UNESCO, has been focusing on this issue, recognizing the worst forms of such abuse, including child labour. The intensity of the problem can be realized from the facts that an estimated number of 250 million children are engaged in some form of labour; the practice of slavery and bondage linked to family debts; serfdom; forced recruitment and involvement in armed conflicts; child pornography and prostitution; production and trafficking of drugs.

The international Labour Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and UNESCO had been holding regular discussions at various levels, organizing international conventions and have adopted a world declaration for protection of children. The human rights of children and the standards in which all governments must aspire in realizing these rights for all children, are fully articulated in one international human rights treaty; namely convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention which the U.N. General Assembly adopted on November 20, 1989 is the most universally accepted human rights instrument in history. It has been ratified by every country in the world except two, the United States and Somalia. By ratifying this instrument, national governments have undoubtedly committed themselves to protecting and ensuring children's rights and they have agreed to hold themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community.

The Convention covers all children below eighteen years of age, recognizing legal rights whose respect is incumbent upon parents, families, societies and governments alike. It forbids discrimination based on caste, color, creed or gender in safeguarding of children's rights. Under the Convention, every girl and boy, irrespective of territorial boundaries, enjoys freedom of expression and the right to access information. Governments are to safeguard children's religious freedom, their freedom of thinking, and their right to mix with others. Child rearing is recognized as the primary responsibility of parents, but governments must extend a helping hand when needed. Children are not to be treated as the personal property of parents, and they are not to be abused under the pretext of child rearing or child development.

However despite the fact that one hundred and ninety one countries have signed the Children's convention and their parliaments have begun to adopt charters pass supporting legislations to implement it, it has yet to be implemented fully in letter and spirit. The result is that there are instances galore of violation of child rights throughout the world even to-day.

Children are still being used as bonded labour, abused in wars, sexually assaulted and pushed to drug trafficking. Recently the UNICEF has stepped up its efforts to safeguard children from various forms of abuses but these have been of limited effectiveness for various reasons. The failure of the U.S.A to be a signatory of the convention is one discouraging factor in this context.

Despite the fact that the USA has so far failed to ratify the Child Rights Convention of 1989, the US Department of State releases every year comprehensive reports on the steps taken by various countries to check human trafficking throughout the globe known as Trafficking In Person reports (T.I.P)

The latest TIP Reports have put India on special watch list Tier Two Watch list and has shown this country in poor light.

The aforesaid report said India lacked a national law enforcement response to any form of trafficking. "India is a source, destination, and transit country for men, women, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced or bonded labour and commercial sexual exploitation," the report says. While I would not deny the intensity of the problem of human trafficking in India, we must remember that problem of human trafficking is a global phenomenon in major parts of the world widely prevalent in African, Asia and elsewhere. It is not an isolated problem in India alone. May be the vast size of the Indian sub-continent makes the problem appear gigantic in magnitude. The USA has a practice of issuing global reports on a wide variety of subjects ranging from violation of human rights and religious freedom to narcotics and trafficking in persons,. Such reports more often are, by their very nature, based on US viewpoints and pre-conceived- notions and have therefore to be adopted with a grain of salt. No wonder, the latest TIP report by the U.S.A has been rejected by the Government of India as "judgmental and prescriptive"

Moreover, we must remember that trafficking in women is only one aspect of the problem of child abuse and we must try to tackle the problem in totality through holistic measures.

To my mind the problem of gender discrimination is no less serious than various other denomination of child abuse. The problem of Gender Discrimination continues to be a feature of both developed, and developing countries, but the picture is quite appalling in the developing world, where the female children and women get less of everything: food, health- care and education.

The very high maternal mortality rate (MMR) in the developing countries is in glaring contrast to the developed countries. In Bhutan, Ghana, Congo and Somalia, the MMRs were 1000 or more for one lakh of live births. The UNDP report says adult women get less education, less

professional training to less pay even when they work longer hours than men. In some societies women have few or no property rights. Women work much longer hours than men (upto 15 hours more a week in rural India) often for much lower wages. Much of women's labour, especially in house work and the growing of subsistence crops, is unpaid and unrecorded in national accounting and statistics. In India we have recently conferred on our women a share in property through an appropriate document in the Right to Property Act.

Gender discrimination is a patent fact not only among adults but also among children in the Third World Countries. A study surveyed the sex-differences in Bangladesh and found that 14.4 per cent of female children were classified as severally malnourished compared to 5.1 per cent of males. The percentage of moderately malnourished girls exceeded that of boys. The study also revealed that despite transport facilities being available, male children were brought to the treatment centres more frequently than female children. The study concluded logically that the health and nutrition behaviour of the parents favoured male children, as boys are more economically valuable than girls.

The comparative economic advantage accounts for the sex bias in favour of boys over girls in the traditional societies of the third world countries. Where agriculture is the main source of employment and income for most of the people and the major contribution factor to GDP, the male child is valued much more than the female child as he constitutes an extra hand to bring in some income to the family, while the girl is considered to be a liability, as she has to leave the family at great expense of dowry and other burdens. The preference for boys results in their better upbringing. In situations of scarcity, the preferential feeding of male children causes nutritional deficiencies in girls resulting in their poor health, which may precipitate a vicious circle of poverty and disease through their weaklings and weak offsprings.

The U.N. Declaration of Women's Rights 1967 postulated the principle of equality of men and women and advocated its universal recognition in law by all countries as an unavoidable necessity. The U.N. was convinced that the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women as well as men in all fields. Countries have to assure equal rights to women as those of men. Discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity, welfare of family and society.

Prevention of the participation of women on equal terms with men in political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries is a great obstacle to the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and humanity. The universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted the principle of non-discrimination and proclaims that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. The General Assembly of U.N. postulated the egalitarian, doctrine of assuring and achieving equal rights to women as those of men. In this context our government is very keen to enact Women's Reservation Bill which would empower our womenfolk in socio-political sector.

I now turn to the problem of child labour. The estimate of Child Labour according to the Planning Commission in March, 1983 was 33.06 million comprising 17.6 million; in the age group of 5-10 years and 15-17 million in the age group of 10-14 years, out of which 14.3 million are rural and 1.67 million urban. Another estimate put the child labour in India at 44 million in the year 1985. The U.N.O. study on "The Child labour in India 1979" has drawn pointed attention to seriousness of the problem. It has been estimated that if workers under 18 years of age could be withdrawn from the labour force and diverted to educational institutions, - some 15 to 20 million unemployed adults would be able to find jobs on standard wages. "Bonded labour" which is a significant feature of children employment in India, constitutes worst form of exploitation under which the labour of young children is pledged to the landowner or creditor by the parents or guardians against an advance taken, often for unproductive purposes. Generally, children are paid low wages, are subjected to excessive hours of work and have to work under terrible conditions, particularly in those occupations that did not come under the jurisdiction of statutory control through labour legislation. Cities bristle with abandoned children by their families on account of their inability to support them. Invariably the street children are picked up and subjected to worst exploitation.

The ILO report on child labour (December, 1999) throws ample light on child labour. There are about 250 million children workers aged 5 to 14 in the world without taking into account those who work with their families in domestic activities. The greatest numbers are in Asia, 44.6 million followed by Africa 23.6 million and Latin America, 5.1 million. The percentage of workers in the 10 to 14 age group is 41.3 in Kenya, 31.4 in Senegal, 30.1 in Bangladesh, 25.8 in Nigeria, 24 in Turkey, 20.5 in Ivory Coast, 17.7 in Pakistan, 16.1 in Brazil, 14.4 in India, 11.6 in China, 11.2 in Egypt, 6.7 in

Mexico, 4.5 in Argentina, 1.8 in Portugal and 0.4 in Italy. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. No reliable figures for workers under the age of 10 are available, though their numbers are significant. In central and eastern Europe, the difficulties connected with the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy have led to a substantial increase in child labour. The same is true of the United States, where with the growth of the service sector, the rapid increase in the supply of part time jobs and the demand for a more flexible workforce have contributed to the expansion of the child labour market.

We in India have been quite alive to the problem of abuse of children and have adopted various steps in this direction. Our Constitution has rightly guaranteed several rights for our children like equality before law, free and compulsory primary education to children between 6 and 14 years of age, prohibition of trafficking and forced labour of children and prohibition of employment of children below 14 years of age in factories, mines and other hazardous occupations. The Constitution of India further enjoins that at the tender age, children should not be subjected to any kind of abuse, and driven by economic necessities these children should not enter into avocation that is unsuited to their age and strength.

On a positive note, the Constitution declares that steps should be taken to ensure:

“That children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment.”

Alongside India has also participated in the U.N. General Assembly Summit in the year 1990, which adopted the Declaration on Survival, Protection and Development of Children.

India is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the year 1992 which makes it incumbent to protect and monitor the rights and privileges that our children have been guaranteed or enumerated in the Convention. Sir, the most recent initiative taken by India in this direction is to adopt the National Charter for Children in the year 2000.

With these Constitutional provisions and international initiatives, there was a genuine need and necessity to put in place an agency that would monitor the implementation of various rights and privileges that have been

guaranteed to our children in various national and international declarations and also in various statutes. Last year the Government passed a law which set up a National Commission for the protection of child rights at the Centre and it also seeks to set up State Commissions in the various States which would effectively implement the provisions regarding the rights and privileges of children.

More recently the Government has issued orders banning the employment of children below the age of 14 years in domestic service and hospitality sector including Dhabas, Tea shops, restaurants, hotels and resorts. This ban would be effective from this year. This is an improvement in the existing situation where the children, under the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 are prohibited from being employed in hazardous professions. However to make this new order more effective there should be a mechanism for proper rehabilitation of these children.

It will thus clear, that we have all along considered children as greatest assets of our country and on behalf of our government may I say that we stand committed to support and actively associate ourselves in the efforts by the international community to create of a world for children divested of all exploitation and abuse. The famous Nobel Prize winner Gabriela Mistral, wrote:

“We are guilty of many errors and many faults but our worst crime is abandoning our children and neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. To him, we cannot answer, ‘Tomorrow’. His name is ‘Today’.”

Let these inspiring words guide us in our stride towards lofty goal of children’s emancipation from all sorts of child abuse.

Thanking you,