

Address by Mrs. D. Purandeswari, MoS (HRD), GOI on “Invisible Faces Of Women On Violence In Politics: Breaking The Silence” at the South Asian Regional Conference on 18-9-2007 in Kathmandu, Nepal.

I deem it great honour to have been called upon to speak in the South Asian Regional Conference organized by South Asia Partnership (SAP)-International in collaboration with International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) South Asia Committee for Political Empowerment of Women (SACPEW). The subject matter of the conference is of extreme relevance and importance in the modern-day scenario which should enthuse all women’s rights activists. I welcome it open-heartedly and hope that the Conference will have an extensive and meaningful discussion on the subject.

Although Violence against women in politics is a major problem in South Asia, yet it still remains a relatively new and unreported issue. Violence against women in politics connotes any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women politician, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life: within family, inter or intra-political party level, at societal and at state level during their political career. It also includes any act of violence against any family member of women politician, which can affect her mental well being deterring her from effective political participation.

Politics and decision making have been closely guarded as men's privileged area with the male dominated party structure and their insensitivity towards importance of women's involvement in political process. The gender insensitive masculine political culture of the region has made it difficult for women politicians to firmly establish themselves in decision making positions. Violence against women politicians has been stanching women's political growth and discouraging women to enter to political discourses. Studies on women and politics have suggested a variety of possible explanations for the paucity of women leaders and the marginalization of women in politics, including electoral systems, party systems, gender-role socialization, women's movement and political culture of violence. The status of violence against South Asian women politicians remains a scantily explored area and available literature on the subject mostly consists of bits of isolated studies touching only some peripheral aspect of the issue.

The intensely competitive world of men dominated politics, their patriarchal mindset and masculine model of political system, is in itself a major obstacle to women's political participation. In South Asia, politics ensures status and is a lucrative source of income and power over which men desire to control. The reluctance of political parties to nominate women candidates is a crucial factor, denying women's participation in governance. Character assassination has been used intentionally and unintentionally by men, women and society as a tool to violate women politicians, forcing many women politicians to quit their political career. Moreover, media as well as

civil society are yet to acknowledge the credibility of women politicians.

Asians have thus always had the reputation for holding their women in low regard. Empowerment of women makes good seminar topics, but in real life, it's the men who decide their role in politics and public life. Indeed, some urban women have managed to create space for themselves. But ironically, it's the south and southeast Asian regions which have thrown up numerous women leaders who have led their countries in the last 50 years. In fact, the first woman prime minister in the world was from South Asia – Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka who came to power way back in 1960. That was the beginning. It laid down the emotional track, which carried all the subsequent women leaders of the region to the most prominent political position in their respective countries. From Indira Gandhi to Benazir Bhutto the first woman to the head an Islamic country to Megawati Sukarnoputri the first woman President of Indonesia. And then we have the cases of Hasina Begum and Begum Khalida Zia. The list is long and we are still counting.

But these illustrations are more in the nature of aberrations and departures from the norm.

Basically, however the question of gender discrimination remains widely prevalent in the political arena. To speak of gender equality is to speak of a world when the ideal scenario would be that both men and women are equal in all respects. But this

contemplated equality is just a myth as yet. Gender equality is an important issue of human rights and social justice. Efforts to promote greater equality between men and women can also contribute to the overall development of human society. Despite a highline consciousness and greater awareness of the role of women, our society does not treat its women as well as its men. Consequently women continue to suffer from diverse deprivations. All this leaves one with a ignoble feeling of frustration, of opportunities missed and challenges unresolved. An International Labour Organizations study shows that women who represent 50% of the world adult population, and one third of the official labour force, perform nearly 2/3rd of the working hours but receive one tenth of the worlds income and owns less than 1% of the world property. The situation in India is no different.

The Economic Survey, 2004-05 observes as follows: I quote:

“As per the 2001 census, women constituted 48% of the total population of the country, women suffer many disadvantages as compared to men in the areas of education, labour participation rate and earnings.” (Unquote).

Having said that, I must admit that in our country, when we framed our constitution in 1950, our founding fathers took care to ensure equality by conferring political right of adult franchise irrespective of gender. Right to exercise vote, fight elections and hold

elective offices were statutorily conferred on all irrespective of gender discrimination. This is quite encouraging considering the fact that in the U.K, Mother of Democracy rights were given only as late as the 20th century.

This coupled with the fact that our Constitution which is the supreme law of the land that expressly prohibits gender discrimination and prescribes, specific, measures for economic and social empowerment of women puts our women on a kind of superior pedestal. The provisions of Art. 14, 15, 16(2), 21, 23, 39(a), 39(d), 39(e) etc., uniformly speak for equal treatment for both men and women in all economic and social activities including educational and cultural activities and make the message loud and clear that State will actively promote measures so that men and women would have equal access to “finer graces of human civilization”.

The result is that today women in India are breaking the gender bias barrier in many professions. Women have been able to open the doors to top corporate jobs, to the civil services, the police service, journalism and a whole range of other fields that were earlier considered exclusively male bastions. Therefore, women cannot, must not and will not be kept behind closed doors anymore.

So far as political empowerment is concerned, we also empower our women to a limited extent in political power by ensuring the women’s direct access to formal political power. Empirical studies world over reveal that women are less corrupt and more

responsible and conscientious in discharging their duties without fear or favour and with justice and equity.

In India since the 73rd Constitutional amendment, which made 1/3rd seats reservation mandatory in Panchayat Raj institutions for women, there has been an extensive debate on the implications of this measure for the balance of power in rural politics, particularly the empowerment of women. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in 1993 have brought a definite impact on the participation of women, in terms of absolute numbers in Panchayat Raj Institutions and local bodies. In these elections between 1993 and 1997, women have achieved participation even beyond the 33% of the seats in some states. Lack of education in the rural areas, social and family barriers and pre occupation with house hold duties, were cited as deterrents that prevented women from participating in the political process. But the mandatory reservation at Panchayati Raj levels has given these women an opportunity to come out and handle obligations in their professional as well as family fronts well enough. The women participation at grass root level has thrown up a trained and younger leadership for the political mainstream that was so far restricted to men and a few selective women.

In electoral terms, women can boast of better track record in India. While 32.43% of women have been elected from recognized parties, since 1984, the success rate of the male counter parts is only 26.50%. This shows that voters do not discriminate against women. Gender biased sidelining is regrettable, because it excludes an entire

untapped gene pool. If more women enter politics, issues like child marriage, dowry and exploitation of women can be tackled. Reservation policies for women in formal political institutions like Panchayati Raj, Legislatures and Parliament must thus be viewed not as a panacea nor a pre requisite, but as important and necessary enabling condition conducive for their empowerment.

In view of the encouraging results that we have obtained since 73rd and 74th , Constitution Amendment Acts, it is thus essential that we pass without delay the Women Reservation Bill making provision for reservation of one third of the seats in Parliament and State Legislatures which successive governments since the last decade of the last century have been striving to introduce in Parliament and make a law. Unfortunately we have not yet succeeded but our efforts are still on. The attempts of all of us, especially women organizations should be directed towards creating an informed public opinion so as to strengthen the hand of the government in this regard to go ahead with this spectacular political reform.

The situation in the rest of South Asia is comparatively bleak. Although many South Asian countries have adopted a quota system or reservation for women's political participation, the level of participation of women from the grassroots and the lower social strata is still negligible. Women's average representation in Parliaments of South Asian nations was 11.7% as of February, 2006 which is still far below the world average of 17%. Violence has been identified as one of the root causes of lower participation of women in political

governance. Insensitive political culture of the region itself has raised an alarming need for the issue of violence against women in politics to be undertaken at regional level and addressed effectively.

As I indicated earlier, political violence against women is an unreported issue. The prevalence of a “Culture of Silence” among women is primarily responsible for this phenomenon. Many women politicians silently suffer violence accepting it as a part of the unchangeable South Asian culture. The deep-rooted cultural barrier and the inability to break this silence has for a long time hampered women's political participation. Until this silence is broken, women's effective participation at all levels of politics in South Asia will continue to be a dream.

Violence against women in politics is an issue of major concern today, but it still remains unaccounted for. Breaking the culture of silence against violence on women politicians has surfaced as a major challenge today. It is thus of utmost importance that a platform be provided for voicing issues of violence particularly against women in politics to prepare a collective agenda for addressing this non-raised issue. People should be encouraged to overcome their fear of sharing grievances that may have arisen from various levels of society.

We must realize women empowerment in the political sphere is a natural corollary of the women's liberation movement

initiated since the conclusion of second World War. Studies have revealed that only 14% of parliamentarians in Asia and just under 14% in the Pacific are women. But even though their numbers may not be big, the expectation is that women's involvement in politics improves the standard of governance for they focus more on development are less corrupt and more sensitive. A study done in Australia a few years back found that 54% of those surveyed believed women who enter politics were motivated by altruistic and community welfare concerns compared to only 13% among men. A good number (64%) felt men were motivated by personal interest and power, compared to only 11% of women. The general feeling is women are outsiders in politics so they are better equipped to transform things.

Few causes promoted by the United Nations have generated more intense and widespread support than the campaign to promote and protect the equal rights of women. The Charter of the United Nations, signed in San Francisco in 1945, was the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right. Since then, the Organization has helped create a historic legacy of internationally agreed strategies, standards, programmes and goals to advance the status of women worldwide. Over the years, United Nations action for the advancement of women has taken four clear directions: promotion of legal measures; mobilization of public opinion and international action; training and research, including the compilation of gender desegregated statistics; and direct assistance to disadvantaged groups. Today the central organizing principle of the work of the United Nations is that no enduring solution to society's

most threatening social, and economic problems can be found without the full participation, and the full empowerment, of the world's women on an equal footing with that of the men in all spheres including governance, administration and political process.

I hope the conference would be able to bring together eminent women leaders of South Asia to share their experiences of dealing with the issues of violence in politics and that their sharing would pave the path for breaking the culture of silence and lay down the foundation for future generation of young women leaders. The conference should bring together the experiences of civil society organizations and media to overcome the challenge of violence against women in politics.

Ladies and gentlemen before I conclude, I would like to say that the U.N. Delegation 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 universal peace require the maximum participation of women as well as men in all fields. It was considered that countries had to assure equal rights of women the negation of which would amount to injustice done to half of humanity and would be 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 was thought to be a great obstacle to the full development

of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity. The universal Declaration of Human Rights therefore asserted the principle of non-discrimination and proclaimed that all human beings were born free and equal in dignity and rights. Our Government was a party to this Declaration of Women Rights, 1967 and is thus committed to the ideal of eradication of gender discrimination in all its shapes and forms including political discrimination. I on behalf of my Government would re-iterate in no uncertain terms that we would march in rapid strides towards this universally committed goal.

With these words, I have great pleasure in addressing you on a subject of such topical importance and sharing. I earnestly hope that this conference would be able to arrive at path-breaking consensus in this regard.

@ @ @