

Address By Smt. D. Purandesari, MoS-HRD(HE) on The Occasion Of International Women's Day On 8-3-2007 To Be Observed By DMI At Nehru Stadium In Chennai At 4-30 Pm

Hon'ble President, DMI, respected Chief Minister Dr.M.Karunanidhi, Hon'ble G.K. Vasan, Hon'ble MOS for Statistics and Programme Implementation and other distinguished guests and friends....

It gives me great pleasure to come here this evening and join you on this happy occasion when you are celebrating the International Women's Day in a grand manner befitting the occasion. The theme of to-day discussion, I understand, will be Empowerment of Women. The subject chosen is of special significance in the context of to-day's scenario when India is poised for an exponential growth and development in the new Millennium.

International Women's Day which is observed on the 8th March every year is an occasion marked by women's groups around the world. This date is also commemorated at the United Nations and is designated in many countries as a national holiday. When women on all continents, often divided by national boundaries and by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, come together to celebrate their Day, they can look back to a tradition that represents at least nine decades of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development. International Women's Day is the story of ordinary women as makers of history; it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate in society on an equal footing with men.

Since those early years, International Women's Day has assumed a new global dimension for women in developed and developing countries alike. The growing international women's movement, which has been strengthened by four global United Nations women's conferences, has helped to make the commemoration a rallying point for coordinated efforts to demand women's rights and participation in the political and economic process. Increasingly,

:: 2 ::

International Women's Day is a time to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of women's rights.

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 a central organizing principle of the work of the United Nations is that no enduring solution to society's most threatening social, economic and political problems can be found without the full participation, and the full empowerment, of the world's women.

The new millennium has witnessed a significant change and attitudinal shift in both women's and society's thoughts about women's equality and emancipation. Many from a younger generation feel that all the battles have been won for women' while many feminists from the 1970's know only too well the longevity and ingrained complexity of patriarchy. With more women in the boardroom, greater equality in legislative rights, and an increased critical mass of women's visibility as impressive role models in every aspect of life, one could think that women have gained true equality. The unfortunate fact is that women are still not paid equally to that of their male counterparts, women still are not present in equal numbers in business or politics, and globally women's education,

:: 3 ::

health and the violence against them is worse than that of men. However, great improvements have been made. We do have female astronauts and prime ministers, school girls are welcomed into university, women can work and have a family, women have real choices. And so the tone and nature of IWD has, for the past few years, moved from being a reminder about the negatives to a celebration of the positives. Annually on 8 March, thousands of events are held throughout the world to inspire women and celebrate their achievements. While there are many large-scale initiatives, a rich and diverse fabric of local activity connects women from all around the world ranging from political rallies, business conferences, government activities and networking events through to local women's craft markets, theatric performances, fashion parades and more. The United States even designates the whole month of March as 'Women's History Month.

I am glad that on the occasion of International Women's Day, the DMI has chosen an appropriate theme for discussion – namely the Women Empowerment.

The Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Dr. M. Karunanidhi and other guest speakers have referred to various facets of this multi-faced subject which lends itself to various dimensions. I would therefore refrain from being repetitive. Suffice to say that despite specific constitutional provisions, legal measures and directives from the court, the gender discrimination in India is a painful but established fact. From the womb to the tomb, there is palpable evidence of a sordid tale of inequity and injustice and abject denial of the finer graces of human civilization to our womankind. I would in this context like to refer to some specific areas of gender discriminations which deserve our focused attention. The first is the frightening rate of decline in sex ratio.

Taking advantage of modern day technologies, attempts are made to detect the sex of the foetus and destroy it in case it is a female foeticide. True the government has put in place a comprehensive Act, PNDT Act which provides for the prohibition of sex selection, before or after conception and for the prevention of their misuse for sex determination leading to the female foeticide. But the decline in the child sex ratio from 976 in 1961 to 927 in 2001 is an important indicator in this regard. The government has several times stated in Parliament, that son preference, neglect of the girl child resulting in higher mortality at younger age, female infanticide are some of the reasons which explain the consistently low levels of sex ratio. The practice of female foeticide followed by female infanticide further eliminates the female child population, though it is a criminal act under I.P.C. This is widely prevalent in A.P, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh as per Government's own admission in Parliament several times.

The other very important problem concerns harassment of women in work places. A few years back the Supreme Court of Indian declared that sexual harassment of women at work place was a gross violation of Fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India vide articles 14,15,21and 23 and should be properly and adequately addressed. The Court had defined 'sexual harassment' in a very wide connotation including within its ambit not only physical contact and advances for seeking sexual favours but also sexually tainted and lewd remarks. The court also insisted on swift legal action and on appropriate disciplinary action against the culprits. But I am not very much aware of the impact of the judgment in controlling, much less eliminating the crime. A survey by the FICCI Ladies Organizations reveals that women in all the four metropolis towns continue to experience various degree of sexual harassment and eve teasing at work places, and on way to work. In Delhi 32% of women feel the city unsafe for them followed by Mumbai which is at a close 29%.

Our state is a welfare state. Since the inception of our independence and certainly since the commencement of our Constitution, we have adopted a socialist Democratic Republic which ensures to all the citizens among other things, social, economic and political justice and at the same time assure dignity of the individual. This assertion devolves heavy responsibilities on the State not only to enact suitable legislation for enhancing the welfare of all sections of the citizens but also ensure that aims objectives of these legislations are effectively implemented to yield positive results. It is here that various State Instrumentalities, Government Departments, police and other law-enforcing agencies including Courts-have to put in unstinted efforts to achieve optimal results out of the laws in force. I realize that gigantic size of the country and enormous magnitude of the problems are by themselves heavy deterrents for quick, effective and positive results but they should not be given as excuses for non-performance and slow results. The Government have over the years put in place a number of legislations for the benefit of womankind, their education, health, job security, congenial atmosphere in workplace, their safety in moving around etc. But unfortunately they have not given us the full benefits. Otherwise how do we explain, continuously declining child ratio, high foeticide and infanticide, high rates of female girl drop outs from the school, continuously rising cases of dowry deaths and cases of rape, sexual harassment and trafficking in women which are constantly showing an upward trend. Against all these crimes and offences, there are laws in place providing deterrent punishment. But our administration it appears is dutifully leaving the victims destitute and desolate. Many cases of domestic violence, eve teasing and rape go unreported because of the slackness of the law enforcing agencies. Our law courts. due to heavy arrears of work, are extremely slow in disposing of gender based offences and the usually there is a yawning time lag between the commitment of the offence and the award of punishment. In this long period, the unfortunate lady victim is socially ostracized while the incidents receive full ::

publicity because of publication in the media and the morbid and sadistic pleasure of the dominant male chauvinists.

Where do we go from here? What is the solution to ensure full gender equity in our political and social system? One instant solution that comes to my mind is the women's empowerment. By ensuring the women's direct access to formal political power and resources to development women's social position will automatically be transformed to a substantial extent. By gaining status and decision making power in the community, their position within the household will also change for the better. 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 from preventing women from participating in political process. But the mandatory reservation at P.R. 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 came boast of better track record. 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. The efforts of all of us, especially women organizations should be directed to create an informed public opinion so as to strengthen the hand of the government in this regard, so that a political consensus would be evolved in favour of the women's reservation bill.

The other most potent instrument for the empowerment of women is through education – an infallible instrument. True we have made some worthwhile improvement in universalizing the elementary education by launching innovative schemes such as Mid-day meal scheme, and Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, but the drop out rates among girl children is still a matter of concern. We have to attain zero-drop out rate and ensure full participation from both male and female child. But more than that, we must succeed in empowering women in vocational streams for this alone will ensure their empowerment in the truest sense of the term by ensuring economic independence and encourage them in their fight

against gender inequality. More than a century back, the Indian saint-patriot Swami Vivekananda was asked as to what should be done to improve the position of women in our Society; the great Swami quipped: "give them education, and then they will themselves decide what reforms are necessary for them". Education, in my perception, has no alternative in fostering dignity, self-sufficiency and qualities of leadership, the attributes that form the basics of women empowerment.

Ladies and gentleman before I conclude, I would like to say that 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 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 to women as those of men. Any discrimination against equal rights of women 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. We have therefore to march in rapid strides towards this universally committed goal.

With these words, I have great pleasure in addressing you this evening on a subject of such topical importance as women's empowerment