

**Address Of Mrs. D. Purandeswari, MOS (HRD-HE) On 25.01.2008
On Changing Role Of Woman In India As The Chief Guest In An
International Conference At Vijayawada Andhra Pradesh.**

Madam principal and other distinguished guests and friends,

It is in deed, a great pleasure to speak on “The Changing Role of Woman in India” – a subject which is extremely relevant in the present day scenario prevalent in the country.

Women in India are beginning to follow the direction that the women of the Western world took more than eighty years ago; demanding treatment as human equals. However, it has become more and more evident as the revolution ages that Indian women may have to adapt the Western feminist method to their very traditional and religious culture. India has different complications that put the development of women in a completely altered context than their Western counterparts. Although the key targets remain similar: improvement of health care, education and job opportunities in order to gain equality between men and women in the various settings of public society, the workplace, the school yard and – possibly the most fundamental setting of all – the home. Women are striving to be independent on the equal level of men. The additional complexities that the women of India must also challenge are the caste system, the heavy religious customs, older and more traditional roles of the sexes, as well as the even stronger power that men hold in India. The status was at one time accepted, but with the Western women’s revolution and perception, the role is slowly succeeding in its

development through both independent groups of women and national and worldwide organizations based on the goal of gaining equality. They have all accomplished much, but have yet to overthrow the male dominated society.

A patriarchal and oppressed society with an inhumane caste system supposedly based on religious faith are obviously not understood since their masculine domination acts against the religious base of men and women living as equals. Despite modernization, women's status remained low and devalued well into the 20th century. Gargi Chakravarty of the National Federation of Indian Women stated in 1990 that "Girls are looked upon by their parents as burdens".

Home for over 500 million women, a country acknowledged for its plurality of traditions, customs and institutions and proud of its heritage of eclecticism, India's contribution to the global women's debate has been rich, diverse and in many ways unique. But like the many contrasts that India's long and variegated history mirrors, the image to the Indian woman is far from uniform. Nothing would therefore be more inaccurate than to try and posit a generalized picture of the Indian woman across social, economic and cultural spaces. The formidable task is to try and depict these contributions, experiences and struggles of Indian woman, their achievements, their concerns, their despairs, their perspectives and their visions.

The principle of gender equality has been basic to Indian thinking for over a century. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a succession of woman's movements, first around burning social issues like women's education and widow remarriage and then around the freedom struggle itself. The fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931 adopted gender equality as a guiding principle. A deep concern with the status of women and the recognition that the progress of the nation of integrally linked with the advancement of women, have under-pinned Indian planning and policy since Independence.

The constitution of India, adopted in 1950, not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of affirmative discrimination in favour of women. the constitution further imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to uphold the dignity of women.

It is very often said that the inherent strength of a society, a culture and a system is judged by the way its woman are treated and the importance assigned to them by the society. The great socio-religious revolutionary, saint, Swami Vivekananda used to observe that the country which does not respect woman hood has never become great nor will ever became great be in future. To quote his soul-stirring words:

“If you do not raise the woman who are but the living embodiment of the Divine Mother, do not think that you have any other way to rise” (Unquote)

To speak of gender equality is to speak of a world when the ideal scenario would be that both men and women are treated equal in all respects. The Indian religion and philosophy assigns a place of honour and divinity to womanhood. Our religious scriptures assign respectable positions of pride and honour to ladies and it is beyond all pale of doubt that womanhood has been worshipped with grace and honour all along in our history. We have thus conceptualized for womanhood a high place in our thinking and cultural psyche.

But in reality this contemplated equality is just a myth as yet. However, gender equality is an important issue of human rights and social justice not only in India or in third world countries alone but almost throughout the world. It is well recognized that efforts to promote greater equality between men and women can also contribute to the overall development of human society. But despite this highline consciousness and greater awareness of the role of women, no society treats its women as well as its men. Consequently women continue to suffer from diverse deprivations. Recently a Study by International Labour Organization reveals that women who represent 50% of the world adult population, and one third of the official labour force, and perform nearly 2/3rd of the

working hours receive only one tenth of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world property.

This is despite the fact that the U.N. Declaration of Women's Rights 1967 formally postulated the principle of equality of men and women and advocated its universal recognition in law by all countries as an absolute 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 and development require the maximum participation of women as well as men in all fields. Countries were accordingly called upon to assure equal rights to women as those of men. Discrimination against women is widely recognized as incompatible with human dignity and welfare of family and society. Prevention of the participation of women on equal terms with men in political, social, economic and cultural activities of their countries is thus a great obstacle to the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity at large. The universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted the principle of non-discrimination and proclaimed that all human beings were born free and equal in status, dignity and rights. The General Assembly of U.N. postulated this egalitarian, concept of assuring and achieving equal rights to women as those of men. And yet gender discrimination against girl children is unfortunately widely prevalent throughout the world and more prominently in Third world countries.

In the latest gender gap index report released by the World Economic Forum (WEF), India keeps company with the worst in the

world. Among the 128 countries that have been evaluated by the WEF, India is ranked 114, followed among others by Yemen, Chad, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Even Philippines, Sri Lanka and Botswana fare much better than us. In many parts of our country women are often treated as if they were a piece of property. In these parts, the sex ratio is most skewed because families often snuff out the lives of girl children before, or immediately after, they are born. In many parts of India, women are viewed as an economic liability despite contributing in several ways to our society and economy. Public health is another area of failure. Hundreds of women in rural India die every year during childbirth for want of timely medical attention. There are thousands more who do not even have access to a primary health centre. Importantly, reforming property laws more rigorously so that gender parity becomes a reality must rank among the government's priorities.

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. Our Constitution which is the supreme law of the land expressly prohibits gender discrimination and prescribes, specific, measures for economic and social empowerment of women. 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 Government has also been creating a policy – enabling environment in which women’s concerns can be reflected, articulated and redressed by the Government, the Voluntary Sector and the Corporate World. As part of this effort, many policy instruments have been brought forth, over the years, leading to Action Plans and programmes in several spheres. Some of the important policy-guiding documents include – The **National Plan of Action for Women** adopted in 1976 which became a guiding document for the development of women till 1988 when a National Perspective Plan for Women was formulated. **The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000)** drafted by a Core-Group of Experts is more or less a long-term policy document advocating a holistic approach for the development of women. **Sharam Shakti – the Report of the National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in Informal Sector (1988)** examines the entire gamut of issues facing women in the unorganized sector and makes a number of recommendations for the betterment of women in the Informal Sector relating to employment, occupational hazards, legislative protection, training and skill development, entrepreneurship development, marketing and credit etc.

The **National Plan of Action of the Girl Child (1991-2000)** is an integrated multi-sectoral decadal Plan of Action, for ensuring

survival, protection and development of children and adolescent girls. In addition to these women-specific policies, there are many more women-related policies like **National Policy on Education (1986)**, **National Health Policy (1983)**, **National Population Policy (1993)**, which have been influencing the welfare and development of women and children in the country.

Such achievements notwithstanding, women still comprise the largest section of population living in absolute poverty and they represent the poorest of the poor. Gender discrimination today, though amongst the most subtle, is one of the most all pervading forms of deprivation. A most telling demographic symptom of such deprivation is the persistence of an adverse sex ratio which declined from 934 females per 1000 males in 1981 to 927 females per 1000 males in 1991. Gender violence, both societal as well as domestic, continues unabated. Women continue to be in marginal employments and low levels of skills, their contribution being largely “invisible”. The prevailing social construction of gender largely relegates women to the inside sphere. Reproduction and responsibilities of nurturance, management of a fragile environment, and low paid or unpaid but heavy work responsibilities in agriculture, animal husbandry and other traditional sectors create a syndrome of gender stereotypes, marginalisation, alienation and deprivation.

What then is the solution? 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 for

development women's social position will automatically be improved 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 prevent women from participating in political and administrative processes. The mandatory reservation at P.R. levels has given our womenfolk 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 also thrown up a trained and younger leadership for the political mainstream that was so far restricted to men and to very few influential women.

In electoral terms, women can boast of better track record. While 32.43% of women have been elected from recognized parties,

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.

Yet a more powerful method of empowerment would be through education. Education is an all pervading solution of multi facing problems of humankind. It widens the mental vision and equips us with the qualities of judgment and discrimination so that we can decide for ourselves as to what is good for us. Education, indeed, is the panacea for all our problems. That is why Swami Vivekananda

observed: **“Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary”**

I am sure all these and other cognate issues of the problems of women empowerment will be comprehensively debated in all its ramifications and a broad consensus thereon will emerge thereon for providing critical inputs for our policy framers in this regard. With these words, I wish this conference all success in their deliberations.

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