

General Debate: Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-first Century

Statement by Hon'ble Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi,

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on June 5, 2000

Mr. President,

Gender equality, development and peace will all be key to the progress of nations in the 21st century. It is therefore appropriate that these are the themes of the first Special Session of the General Assembly in the new millennium. India was the first country to adopt the Beijing Platform for Action without reservations and is committed to its goals. In India, the year 2001 is 'Women's Empowerment Year'. Five years down the road from Beijing, as we review progress and define our vision for the 21st century, we seek inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, who said, long before it was fashionable to do so: *"I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion, she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality."*

The expression of egocentric individualism is alien to Indian social thought. Through its multiple social units, Indian society strives for harmony, plays down differences and lays emphasis on family values and social responsibilities. We do not accept that one sex is inferior to the other. Both share in equal measure the common humanity on which we base our claims for equal human rights and freedoms. No human society is perfect, but in our vision, legislation and policies, we believe that if any section of society - women, men, children, caste or class - is denied dignity and respect, these must be restored to them and enjoyed by them. It is only the ethos of this internalised and convincing striving for harmony and equality which has enabled our vast society to strengthen democratic norms over five decades at all levels of governance.

We take pride in the fact that we are the world's largest democracy, and that our Constitution not only guarantees equality for women in every sphere of political, economic and social life, but also provides for affirmative action in their favour.

In India, we have adopted a two-pronged strategy for the empowerment of women; while mainstreaming gender in all policies and programmes across all sectors, we have concentrated on making women-specific interventions. Literacy rates for women have increased faster than for men. In the crucial area of reproductive health, our Reproductive Child Health Programme adopts a non-prescriptive approach to family planning and encourages greater male participation. In geographical scope, our Integrated Child Development Services Programme is one of the largest outreach programmes in the world and, with over a million village-level workers, it is the largest women's workforce under any one programme anywhere. The girl child is a special focus of our social concern. Organising

women's collectives and self-help groups has helped in the economic empowerment of women. Micro-credit institutions in rural areas have proven to be particularly successful. The strong partnership established with the women's movement and NGOs has galvanised social mobilisation and action in local communities. The judiciary and media have played important roles. All of this has brought about a perceptible improvement in the position of women in India. We are fully dedicated to proceeding with determination on the road of women's advancement.

In terms of political empowerment, Constitutional Amendments have reserved for women one-third of the seats in grassroots democratic institutions at village and municipal level; nearly seven hundred thousand women now hold positions as Members and Chairpersons. To carry this process further, our Government has now introduced another Constitutional Amendment Bill, which seeks to make similar reservations for women in Parliament and in the State legislatures.

Important additions to the interlocking and mutually reinforcing web of institutions and systems we have created to advance the cause of women are the Parliamentary Committee on the Empowerment of Women set up in 1997, a National Centre for Gender Training and Research and a revitalised Committee on Gender Mainstreaming. We are strengthening our monitoring mechanisms and databases to ensure that the benefits of budgetary allocations for women in all schemes and programmes do reach them.

While we, like others in the larger community of democracies, work at the national level to implement what we all accepted as common goals in the Beijing Platform, the international environment has not been as supportive as we had hoped it would be, and there have been developments that have thwarted national efforts. Globalisation has been a mixed blessing for women; in some developing countries, it has brought them new economic opportunities, but many feel that their marginalisation has been accentuated by globalisation. Governments have fewer resources and sometimes less freedom to promote social development, and in several instances, the unchecked power of corporate capital, even over national governments, has increased disparities within societies. Women have been the most vulnerable to the social stresses of globalisation.

To stop all forms of violence against women must be a foremost priority for all of us. That this violence persists and takes new forms should be a matter of both shame and concern for all civilised societies. But, in addition, democratic and pluralistic countries have had to face proxy wars and externally-sponsored terrorism; women and children are the first targets and favoured victims. The international community must unite to respond to these challenges.

Mr. President,

The feminisation of poverty and the marginalisation of women need urgent remedial attention. The eradication of poverty was the foremost objective of the Platform for Action. That remains unrealised. Instead, we see the emergence of the "new poor" - a new category of poor who do not inherit poverty but fall into it because of inadequate incomes, a lack of access to social services and ecological deterioration. Gender bias is still not uncommon in programmes to remove illiteracy and malnutrition. Maternal mortality rates are unacceptably higher in the developing countries. While governments in developing

countries do their best to improve health services for women and to provide medicines at affordable costs, they need greater support from their development partners in the international community.

As we stand today in the first year of the new millennium, our focus should be on the realisation of full freedom for women. From liberation to emancipation to empowerment, the story of the fight for gender equality has been one of a continuing struggle to demolish stereotypes and negative social attitudes while empowering women economically. In this Special Session we need to commit ourselves even more strongly not only towards the full empowerment of women but towards their "full empowerment in full freedom".

We believe that India offers in its ancient tradition a conceptual understanding for our task. The concept of complementarity between the sexes, rather than conflict, has inspired our thought through the ages, and guides our actions to the present day. This intuition of complementarity is illustrated in Indian sculpture and painting by the figure of '*Ardhanarishvara*' - half male and half female, divided vertically down the centre. Modern scientific research, which has located in the left and right sides of the brain what are commonly described as male and female characteristics, confirms a truth that our ancients divined intuitively. Science and faith both tell us that all of us carry from birth the potential to develop together and to celebrate the masculine and feminine aspects of the human personality. As no man or woman is an island, so, at the deepest level, no individual is purely male or female. Different situations bring out unsuspected qualities or failings in ourselves.

The embodiments of knowledge, prosperity and power of the one supreme being in India's traditions are a feminine trinity - *Saraswati*, the presiding deity of learning, *Lakshmi*, the presiding deity of wealth and *Durga*, who personifies strength and power. It is our vision that women in the 21st century should be embodiments of knowledge, prosperity and power.